Towards a poetics of overtakelessness: the work of contemporary elegy in the writing of five North American poets

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Towards a Poetics of Overtakelessness: The Work of Contemporary Elegy in the Writing of Five North American Poets

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Declaration

I, John Mackay, declare that this thesis is all my own work.

Signed declaration:

Date:

Abstract

This thesis addresses a condition of 'overtakelessness' – a word used by Emily Dickinson to refer to the irretrievability of the dead – developing it as a conceptual framework to explore contemporary elegy in the work of five North American poets: Susan Howe, Mary Jo Bang, Anne Carson, Dean Young, and Mark Doty. Overtakelessness, a term to describe that which is unavoidable but cannot be encompassed, serves to illuminate the divide between desire and fulfilment in poetic encounters with loss. In Chapter 1, I argue that Susan Howe's ethical configuration of lost others as retrieved textual traces from the archive represents her attempt to establish a visual and material conception of overtakelessness, and places under scrutiny the role of language in the scene of elegy. I show in Chapter 2 that Mary Jo Bang's failure to reach her son can be attributed to the fact that language, like the sought other, has an unfathomable surplus that cannot be encompassed, and that the printed word is unequal to the task of articulating grief. In Chapter 3, Anne Carson's interaction with personal relics represents an exploration of what constitutes her brother's absence, and an implicit recognition that material objects – and the overtakelessness that they carry into her work – have supplanted his presence. Chapter 4 demonstrates that an engagement with overtakelessness is problematised further by the poet's preoccupation with an unassimilable self as Dean Young's alter ego undergoes an imagined disintegration. Finally, in Chapter 5 I propose that for Mark Doty overtakelessness has personal, social and political dimensions as he responds to an actual catastrophe, the AIDS epidemic, and explores the tension between private and public loss. I show in this thesis that overtakelessness emerges in the poetic space, suggesting that the elegy's encounter with the dead might equally be described as a negotiation with overtakelessness itself.

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Introduction

Beginnings

This thesis is centrally concerned with the nature of contemporary elegy, and examines the work of five living North American poets – Susan Howe, Mary Jo Bang, Anne Carson, Dean Young, and Mark Doty. I will investigate elegy as the scene for an encounter with the unreachable dead, using a conceptual framework derived from the word 'overtakelessness', which appears in a poem by Emily Dickinson before finding its way into Anne Carson's elegy via an essay by Martin Heidegger. Overtakelessness, a term to describe 'that which cannot be […] avoided or seen to the back of' (Carson 2010), enables an exploration of the intricacies of elegy's work in the liminal territory that separates the living from the dead. If the dead are unavoidable but cannot be encompassed, in what ways can the elegist negotiate with the terms of their absence, and with the overtakelessness that encloses them? I will demonstrate that the poetic elegy is a staging ground for the complex negotiation of a space that incorporates a number of different demands – ethical, emotional, material, personal, and political. Given the restrictions of the printed page, how can the elegist begin to try and meet the requirements of an encounter with loss?

As a starting point, it seems pertinent to acquire an initial impression of what might bring the poetic elegy into being. In an essay that examines poetry of grief, Mark Doty recollects his reaction to the deaths of friends during the AIDS epidemic: 'I couldn't stand it if I didn't make something out of it, even if what I made couldn't possibly be commensurate with the increasing fear, uncertainty, and loss' (2006). The impulse to 'make something' tangible as a response to death is tempered by an appreciation of the divide that separates the poem from an encompassment of absence. Doty also implicitly notes the tension that arises in the scene of elegy between individual and communal loss. How can a poem born of private grief 'be commensurate with' the devastating effects of mass death on the wider community?

With this question in mind, I began my thesis as a study of contemporary American elegy through the lens of the work of Doty, whose poetry and non-fiction spans a period from 1987 to the present day. I had noted Doty's affinity with the genre of elegy, which

comes to the fore particularly in his poetry volumes *My Alexandria* and *Atlantis*, published in the first half of the 1990s in the midst of the AIDS crisis in America. Furthermore, I considered that Doty's work, and his particular personal circumstances – his lover died of AIDS in 1994 – would provide fertile ground for an examination of elegy, given my intention to explore what William Watkin describes in his study of the poetics of mourning as 'the difficulty of squaring the multitude of the dead with the single instance of a significant death' (2004: 17). The AIDS epidemic brought home with particular potency the fact that each individual death contributes to the shared disintegration of a wider community, thus carrying a potential freight of social responsibility for Doty – a gay poet experiencing the deaths of his lover and friends – that might surpass the confines of a personal tragedy. Individual and communal loss have an uneasy relationship in a country where contemporary media funnel images of mass-produced death into the homes of American consumers:

> Many films, television dramas, and news programs mass-market sensational grief and violent death, pornographically distributing them everywhere while locating their occurrence always elsewhere. Radio and TV companies sell an endless series of instantly available wars, atrocities, murders, griefs, and natural disasters from around the world. […] For the consumer, some of these macro-cosmic representations of death and loss […] risk dwarfing the more personal experience of mortality. The commercial panorama of death threatens to alienate us still further from an intimate relation to our own deaths and the deaths of loved ones.
>
> (Ramazani 1994: 225)

The contemporary phenomenon of an increasing emotional and physical distance from the dead suggests that if individual consumers are inexorably separated from an impression of the personal relevance of death, then they may also fail to fulfil what might be seen as their obligations to the dead. In his discussion of the relationship between mourning and responsibility, R. Clifton Spargo highlights a particular moment from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when at the funeral procession for Ophelia, Hamlet draws a contrast between his own 'elegiac estimation of Ophelia' (Spargo 2004: 137) and Laertes's love for his sister:

I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?

(1982: V. 1. 264-66)

There is in Hamlet's voicing of the disparity between the efficacy of Laertes's mourning for Ophelia, and his own – apparently far superior – show of grief, a suggestion that the expression of mourning can be quantified. But it is the final sentence of the above passage that acquires particular pertinence because according to Spargo, Hamlet's question arrives 'at the two principals of grief: the mourner and his action on behalf of the dead'. Spargo adds: 'It is just possible that, in asking Laertes what he will do, Hamlet asks him to consider the end of his actions and, ultimately, what is to be done for the dead' (2004: 138).

Spargo draws attention to a key dynamic of poetic mourning, 'the mourner and his action on behalf of the dead', and to one of the most compelling questions that might be asked of an elegist – 'what is to be done for the dead'? He suggests that an encounter with loss is imbued with a sense of responsibility – that the elegist is compelled to write at least in part by an ethical demand that those who are absent and silent should be given presence and a voice. Given this argument, to fail to do anything for the dead – irrespective of whether they are personally known to the elegist – is perhaps to flout an ethical principle that lies at the heart of being human. The absence of the dead – and the fact that they cannot be encompassed – brings into focus a characteristic of otherness that demands recognition. Does the elegist have an ethical responsibility to preserve the alterity of the other and avoid the assimilation of the voice of the other into the words of the self? If so, how does the poem negotiate with this demand?

The poet's ethical attention to the otherness of the other is problematised by the fact that in the scene of elegy, action on behalf of the dead is always to an extent action on behalf of the self. The elegist's impulse to protect the interests of the dead is complicated by the presence of the poet engaged in an act of poetic mourning; that is to say, the elegist's approach to the other can never be entirely objective given the poet's initiation of a relationship between the self and the other – and therefore a potential mingling of the desires and anxieties of the elegist and the elegised – within the construct of the poem. To what extent does the elegy become an expression of the self and an effacement of the other, particularly when one considers that the poet's depiction of the dead will be at least in part a subjective account?

It is important to note that the words of the poem have a potentially distancing effect that reaches beyond questions of subjectivity and objectivity. After the primary loss of the corporeal presence of the other, an encounter with the dead is mediated on the page through a verbal and visual representation that foregrounds the absence of the elegy's elusive object. What are the implications for the elegy, and the reader, if the elegist's language is not equipped for the task of reaching the dead – that is, establishing a relation between the poet and the lost other – or for articulating grief? Further, does the elegist write with an awareness of the reader's potential expectations of an account of loss – that it should be authentic and redolent with grief – particularly if the loss in question is personal and immediate?

It became increasingly evident that I needed to look beyond the work of Doty in order to open up the scene of elegy and think more broadly about the questions that were being raised. In order to make my thesis about contemporary elegy as immediate and relevant as possible, I felt it was important to select for primary study only the writing of currently living and working poets. My chapters on Mary Jo Bang, Anne Carson, and Dean Young each take as their primary focus work that was published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The principal poems selected for study in my chapter on Mark Doty appear in two volumes published in the mid-1990s, and my examination of Susan Howe's publications reaches back to 1985 at the earliest.

This thesis focuses on poets from North America, in part because the elegy has a secure foothold in America's literary and cultural identity – in his work *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*, Max Cavitch notes that elegy 'has an unbroken history in English-speaking North America from the earliest years of British settlement' (2007: 2). Cavitch's observation of elegy's origins foregrounds a foundational question of the significance of the frontier in American history and culture. The use of the term to denote the outermost point of settled land beyond which lies wilderness provides a connecting thread between the topographical reality for colonial settlers in America and the metaphorical terrain inhabited by a genre that explores the liminal territory between the known and the unknown. The notion of frontier acquires particular potency for contemporary American elegy as the term foregrounds the key divide between ideas of the individual and the collective in a country where 'the more personal experience of mortality' is severely diminished (Ramazani 1994: 225), and as Lauren Berlant observes:

'[T]here is no public sphere […], no context of communication and debate that makes ordinary citizens feel that they have a common public culture' (1997: 3).

I will show that the work of elegy takes place on a number of different frontiers, separating the living and the dead, the private and the public, the self and the other. Susan Howe notes in America what she describes as 'our contemporary repudiation of alterity' (1993a: 89), and the AIDS epidemic in particular served to illustrate the sharp division in American society between legitimised and delegitimised others – the machinery of social and political exclusion that decides who is worthy of mourning. I will also demonstrate that frontiers are established on the poetic page itself, which stages an encounter between textual, visual and material elements, raising questions about the role of language in poetic mourning.

Cavitch remarks that elegy in America 'remains a capacious, flexible, widely practiced poetic genre' that 'figures prominently on the contemporary scene' (2007: 1). However, even though Cavitch's text is to date the only full-length study of American elegy, as the title of the book indicates it does not extend its reach beyond work of the late nineteenth century, leaving a large tranche of unexplored ground. The aim of my thesis, as noted at the beginning of this Introduction, is to explore contemporary elegy using the concept of overtakelessness, which establishes its own frontier territory – an amorphous space in which the dead are simultaneously called to presence and shown to be hiding. But first, it is important to examine the terrain of contemporary elegy itself in order to consider critical perceptions of the genre, and to approach a preliminary understanding of its constitution.

Contemporary Elegy

The dead fall outside the bounds of comprehension for the living, and as such present an interminable puzzle to the poet who might wish to give shape to the amorphous experience of loss and mourning. Personal memories of the departed may be numerous and vivid, but they are intangible and subject to distortion; material relics are both inhabited and left hopelessly abandoned by their previous owners. The poet might endeavour to recommence an abruptly curtailed conversation with the dead, but how is it possible to engage in meaningful dialogue when one party is irremediably absent? And

in any case, how can words in their familiar iterations hope to flesh out the unique and irreplaceable deceased?

Rather like the poet's approach to that which is lost and unreachable, a study of elegy must first recognise the precariousness of the territory to be explored. W. David Shaw illustrates the plight of the scholar in this particular field when he points out that 'death is a loss to a void beyond understanding', and '[b]ecause of this built-in limit, all knowledge of elegies is […] a learned ignorance of things elegists and mourners can never hope to know' (1994: 244). Shaw gives the impression of entering a scene that is irredeemably indistinct – where for the critic, the effect of distancing from the core object echoes the divide between the poet and the sought other. Perhaps the one assertion that can be made with any certainty about contemporary elegy is that it eludes capture as definitively as the dead themselves. In its most basic terms, the primary OED definition of elegy as 'a song of lamentation, esp. for the dead' has been overtaken by time as surely as the description of the genre by T. V. F. Brogan et al as 'a short poem, usually formal or ceremonious in tone and diction, occasioned by the death of a person' (1993: 322).

Rather, the scope of elegy has widened immeasurably from its historical remit as a poem that principally responded to a specific event of death; such has been the nature of its evolution and mutation that, according to Karen Weisman, '[t]here is little scholarly consensus about what constitutes an elegy, or how to distinguish between elegy and the broader category of elegiac literature' (2010: 2). Weisman indicates a notion that elegy has become a much more general poetry of loss and melancholy that is as likely to be used as a vehicle to explore particular emotions as it is to mourn the dead. In addition, her comment implies that not only might the elegy have travelled beyond its definition as a poem of mourning, but also that it might not even be a poem at all. For example, Roger Luckhurst notes the exponential growth of the trauma memoir – explicit autobiographical accounts of, typically, cancer, AIDS, and mental illness, as well as the loss of parents – in America in the 1990s. He suggests that this 'distinctly contemporary form' might be figured as a response to the fact that '[i]n advanced capitalist societies, encounters with extremity are suppressed: birth, death, insanity […] are all removed from the everyday and placed under technical and institutional command' (2008: 128-29). In the face of the suppression of individual traumatic experience, has pathography

become an immediately accessible outlet for expressions of loss and grief that has effectively democratised elegiac literature? If the trauma memoir is a contemporary form of elegiac literature, could it also be described as an elegy?

David Kennedy makes the point that it might no longer be accurate to talk about elegy merely 'as a sub-genre of poetry', and that 'almost any […] cultural product' could conceivably be described as belonging to the genre, leading him to pose the question that 'if that is so then where does that leave poetic elegy?' (2007: 1). Certainly, as Cavitch suggests, above, the poetic elegy is still in rude health in America, but given increasingly fluid interpretations of the genre, why does poetry still have a privileged status in the expression of loss and mourning? The poem is a space that offers the opportunity for an intense engagement with words and silence that might get closer, and in a more concise manner than prose, to a shaping of grief. Poetry appears to promise the sort of intimacy, profundity, and imaginative power, backed by a weight of historical tradition, that could allow the individual reader to come to a greater understanding of their own loss, and to participate in a feeling of communality – a shared emotion – that is not so immediately accessible elsewhere. The poem's intricacies of language and form have the potential to open up – while never fully explaining – the complexities of the inexpressible. Jahan Ramazani observes that 'contemporary elegies mourn without healing; they finger the communal wounds of grief without closing them up' (2006), indicating that a crucial ingredient of the poem's relationship with loss is a recognition of what can't be encompassed – and the ways in which that lack contributes to the dynamic of elegy.

It should be noted that the context for this flourishing genre in America is a culture that is largely in a state of denial about mortality and mourning. Peter M. Sacks, who includes a brief 'Epilogue' on American poetry in his study of English elegy, notes that from a historical perspective American culture is rooted 'in a Puritan society marked by the severe repression and rationalization of grief', which, when added to 'its schooling in the almost exclusively forward-looking orientation of a long pioneer experience', results in a 'particular difficulty in accommodating genuine mourning' (1985: 313). Writing more than twenty years after Sacks, Sandra M. Gilbert is more forthright when she observes that there is in contemporary America 'a cultural context in which death is a

scandal to be avoided or denied and grief an embarrassment to be deplored or derided' (2007: 411).

During the two decades between Sacks's and Gilbert's observations – a period that incorporated the emotional and physical devastation of the AIDS epidemic and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 – there appears to have been a paradoxical hardening of grief-aversion in contemporary America. Although Americans became intimately acquainted with death on a large public scale, the prevailing message disseminated by society and the mass media during the AIDS crisis was one of repudiation for the victims, both on the grounds of their homosexuality and the manner in which they had died, perceived to be as a result of sexual excess. In Chapter 5, I examine Mark Doty's attempted restoration of social and political signification to the conflated homosexual/AIDS victim through the lens of Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), in which she notes the illegitimacy of the homosexual body, and its consignment by the 'heterosexual hegemony' to a domain of exclusion. The viability of the heterosexual body, on the other hand, is made to *matter*, so that according to society's 'regulatory norms', there is a sphere of 'lives worth saving, lives worth grieving' (1993: 16).

Therefore, the potential for an enhanced collectivity – with an attendant communal outpouring of emotion – that might emerge from a real catastrophe was summarily jeopardised by the suggestion that certain members of the community should not be allowed to mourn because those whom they were mourning were not deserving of grief. In her later work, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler examines such prohibition in the context of a post 9/11-America where, shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center, 'President Bush announced on September 21 that we have finished grieving and that *now* it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief' (2004: 29).[1] On the basis of such reactions to major human disasters, it appears that American society decides who is allowed to mourn and to be mourned, and then

[1] Butler summarises a transcript of President George W. Bush's address to Congress, delivered on the evening of 20 September 2001 and published in *The New York Times*, 21 September 2001, 'A Nation Challenged; President Bush's Address on Terrorism Before a Joint Meeting of Congress', <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/21/us/nation-challenged-president-bush-s-address-terrorism-before-joint-meeting.html> [accessed 14 March 2014].

compresses the expression of such grief so that it is only briefly experienced in a public sphere.

How does the contemporary elegy respond to a culture that places severe restrictions on open mourning? If grief is, as Gilbert indicates above, regarded as such a shameful emotion, then the elegist might react with an explicit display of sorrow so that the elegy becomes a space for personal expression that bridges the divide between the private and public spheres. Stanley Plumly notes that '[i]n American poetry, […] the elegy has been less an issue of occasion than an expansive and inclusive way of processing emotion' (2007: 32), suggesting that the elegy has become an outlet – one that can be shared by a wider reading public – for feelings disallowed by societal convention. However, it is far from straightforward to articulate the experience of loss, and the inherent limitations of language mean that the tasks of being 'expansive' and 'inclusive' can prove a heavy burden to bear for the poet. In Chapter 2, I show how Mary Jo Bang not only attempts to process her complex emotions following the sudden death of her son, but also makes a particular demand of her elegies – that they should somehow quantify her grief, recalling Hamlet's claim, above, that what can be arrived at is a measurable 'sum' of feeling.

Can the scene of elegy be positioned as a countercultural space to set against the prevailing social norms for mourning? Ramazani suggests that contemporary elegy has the capacity to set itself apart 'from conventional state and commercial genres of mourning' (1994: 364) as part of an 'effort both to defy the social suppression of grief and to create new languages for its articulation' (1994: 362). He proposes a parallel between the work of elegy and that of 'unconventional memorials' (1994: 362) such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which incorporates within its numerous panels miscellaneous fragments of relics once owned and inhabited by the dead, such as items of clothing, photographs, and letters.[2] The Quilt displays its resistance to the disallowance of collective mourning for AIDS victims by stitching together many different intimate expressions of loss, and situating them in a public space. In this way, the memorial notes the role of language in elegiac expression, but also foregrounds 'new languages' that are

[2] The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was conceived in November 1985 by San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones, and is now made up of more than 48,000 separate panels dedicated to over 94,000 individuals. The entire 54-ton Quilt can be viewed on the website, <http://www.aidsquilt.org/> [accessed 13 August 2014].

constituted by visual and material elements. How might this strategy translate into book form? In Chapter 3, I consider the ways in which Anne Carson's *Nox*, a photocopied scrapbook enclosed in a box, foregrounds the role of the material object in an encounter with loss. How does the presentation of visual material redefine the relationship between the elegist and the elegised?

The central positioning of miscellaneous objects in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and the prominence of images of artefacts in Carson's *Nox*, indicate an archival impulse on the part of the mourner to retain the objects of the dead in order to preserve a tangible connection with the lost person. Material relics, which have been invested with meaning by those who have died, are in turn invested with significance by the living – to the extent that the object might eventually come to supplant the elegised as a presence in the mind of the mourner. In this way, the mourner's fetishisation of the material object as a response to the corporeal absence of the dead indicates the paradoxical nature of the object as simultaneously a tangible – and potentially consolatory – presence and a stark, uncompromising reminder that the dead are permanently elsewhere.

Carson's photocopied images of objects in *Nox* often appear without accompanying explanation or contextualisation, accentuating the emotional and physical gulf that divides the object and its referent. To the neutral observer, personal relics are extraordinarily intimate, but also unfathomable in their arrangement and expression, indicating that a neat transition to comprehension and consolation is unavailable. It might be said, in fact, that one of the primary contemporary demands of poetic mourning is that it is precisely consolation that should be avoided if the elegist is to counter the effects of an American culture that derides the open expression of grief. In such a culture, the dead risk being lost to view as the mourner becomes more concerned by the need to curtail mourning, or at least to ensure that her grief does not become excessive or ultimately tiresome to an impatient audience.

Further to his enquiry about what might be done for the dead, Spargo observes the ethical dimension attached to a refusal of consolation, and a rejection of the cultural demands of mourning, because 'consolation always involves a relenting of the hypothesis of agency, a humbling recognition that there is nothing more one could have done or might still do for the other' (2004: 37). Following this line of argument, if the

contemporary elegist were to relinquish a sense of agency, then the elegy might become a mere endorsement of the cultural edicts that surround it. Instead, a more dynamic genre might resist taboos and refuse to comply with prohibitions on expressions of grief. Ramazani remarks of the contemporary elegy that 'many of the strongest – in revolt against consolation in its religious, literary, psychiatric, and political forms – are poems less of solace than of melancholia, less of resolution than of protracted strife' (1994: 226). Is such 'strife' constituted not only by prolonged battles with the effects of loss in all its forms, but also the substantial challenge presented by the different demands on the genre? And is the 'revolt' conducted against precisely the sort of passage to consolation that is described by psychoanalytic theories of mourning?

For a number of decades, studies of the literature of loss have made significant use of Sigmund Freud's seminal 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' as a means of approaching an understanding of the various processes of mourning, and applying that model to a dissection of the elegy.[3] In summary, Freud's conceptualisation of 'the work of mourning' is a withdrawal from 'attachments' to the 'loved object', to the point where such work is finished and 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again'. On the other hand, 'melancholia', according to Freud, is characterised by an unhealthy prolonged attachment to the loved object, incorporating 'an extraordinary diminution in […] self-regard' (1984b: 253-54). Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Melissa Zeiger notes that historically the pervading presence in critical approaches to elegy has been 'a work-of-mourning model based on Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"', which 'conceives the genre as a translation into literature of the grieving process following a death, leading to resignation or consolation' (1997: 3).

Certainly, the application of a psychoanalytic approach to poetic mourning has its value – not least, as Ramazani notes, as a means to 'abstract and recognize the psychic tendencies of the modern elegy' (1994: 30). For instance, in my discussion of Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy* in Chapter 2, Freud's findings illuminate the mourner's susceptibility to 'a turning away from reality' (Freud 1984b: 253) as the poet imagines a world that is

[3] In an 'Editor's Note' that prefaces 'Mourning and Melancholia (1917 [1915])', Angela Richards writes that '[t]he final draft of the paper was finished on 4 May 1915, but […] it was not published till two years later' (1984b: 247).

'[c]artoonish and mint-sequined' (Bang 2007: 65)[4] following her son's death. There are also indications in Bang's language – for example, her repetition of the phrase 'going on' (Bang 2007: 24; 33; 52)[5] – that she might be conscious of the demand that mourning should be 'overcome after a certain lapse of time' (Freud 1984b: 252).

However, as Ramazani adds with regard to a psychoanalytic approach to mourning, its 'theoretical vocabulary is inevitably reductive – not only of the many verbal and literary complexities of the genre but also of the multiple kinds of grief to be found within it' (1994: 30). In short, my consideration of the 'multiple' demands of the elegy – which incorporate the psychoanalytic, but also the social, cultural, and historical – means that an account of elegy based solely on Freud's model of healthy mourning on the one hand, and pathological melancholia on the other, would fail to embrace in sufficient detail and nuance – and might act to withdraw legitimacy from – the many different voices that contribute, via the elegist, to contemporary poetry of loss in America. For instance, in Chapter 5, I examine the extent to which Mark Doty's poetry might be conceived as the restoration of a voice to a community that has been silenced by disease and discrimination. In this sense, Doty's poetic mourning for homosexual AIDS victims becomes a political act, opposing the cultural edict that repudiates certain members of society and deems them less worthy of mourning than others. As Greg Forter points out, with particular relevance for Doty's life and work, 'to establish a universal pattern of mourning and enjoin all victims of loss to follow it is to erase the particularities of lived experience, and often, to delegitimate continued attachment to what a dominant culture deems unimportant or pernicious' (2003: 138).

It appears, therefore, that there are restrictive implications for the study of elegy in applying what Kennedy calls 'Freud's privileging of mourning over melancholia' (2007: 42), wherein mourning is termed 'normal' (Freud 1984b: 264), whereas the melancholic suffers what Freud describes as a 'disorder' (1984b: 256), leading to the melancholic being suspected to have 'a pathological disposition' (1984b: 252). Not only is there the risk of transferring Freud's implied rigidity of boundaries over to the study of poetry of loss, but also the possibility of transferring assumptions from Freud's model about the

[4] 'We are only Human', in *Elegy*.

[5] 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus'; 'No Exit'; 'Intractable, and Irreversible'.

quality and efficacy of an elegist's poetic mourning, so that critical judgments are made about the poet from a personal as well as a literary perspective.

Rather, I have found more useful to the opening up of the scene of contemporary elegy two significant modifications to Freud's theories of mourning and loss. In Chapter 3, French psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche's discussion of the mourning process – that it allows for a reworking and reinterpretation of psychoanalytic material, rather than a more straightforward severing of attachment between the libido and the object, as conceived by Freud – illuminates Anne Carson's treatment of her brother's words and material relics in the pages of *Nox*. In my discussion of Dean Young's *Elegy on Toy Piano* in Chapter 4, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's repositioning of the subject and the object from Freud's account of the fort-da game proves valuable in an examination of the poet's attempts to gain mastery over mortality by activating a space of fantastical play within the elegy.

The sharp contrast between, for instance, Young's bouts of absurd humour in his bathetic self-elegising and Carson's enigmatic contemplation of her brother's detachment from the objects that supplant his presence, indicates the rich variety of styles and content that characterise contemporary elegy. William Watkin observes the long and complex history of poetic elegy, in which it has developed 'from ululation and repetition of the name of the lost beloved, through pagan pastoral and Christian redemptive forms', before most recently 'mutating into narratives of depression and confession'. However, it remains the case, he claims, that 'elegy has never got away from the fact that it is a cry, pure and simple. It cries out, "I lack! I haven't got! I do not see you, […] I cannot see myself […][.] It feels like I am in the dead's place"' (2004: 157). In the next section, I will show how overtakelessness – the concept I am using to investigate a poetics of contemporary elegy – illuminates the 'lack' that sits at the heart of elegy. What are the dimensions of this conceptual framework, and how does it contribute to an understanding of the poet's encounter with loss?

Overtakelessness

Overtakelessness is a paradoxical concept: the word is conspicuous in its strangeness, but alludes to the inconspicuousness that characterises the absent other; it is an

expression of what is fundamentally inexpressible. The plenitude of the concept is founded on a description of the profound lack that inhabits the dead. Overtakelessness encourages the pursuit of that which can never be reached, and in the process provokes a series of questions that can never be comprehensively answered. It is a word that calls the dead to presence by making visible their absence:

The overtakelessness of those
Who have accomplished Death
Majestic is to me beyond
The majesties of Earth.

The soul her "Not at Home"
Inscribes upon the flesh –
And takes her fair aerial gait
Beyond the hope of touch.

(Dickinson 1970: 690)[6]

Emily Dickinson suggests that it is precisely the unreachability of the dead that gives them their irresistible allure: the absent other is both unlocatable and inconceivable, but overtakelessness affords the dead a presence that in the eyes of the poet surpasses all the tangible glories of 'Earth'. The poet observes the intangibility of the lost other – the transition from material 'flesh' to the ethereal 'soul' – through the trope of 'Home', a word that denotes both a physical structure and more nebulous notions of emotional and spiritual fulfilment. Dickinson situates her idea of overtakelessness within a framework of the religious sublime – the poem closes with a conception of transfiguration that places 'her fair aerial gait' beyond the boundary of the mortal world – but this imagery allows the poet to explore the limitations of the poem itself. Linda Freedman observes that Dickinson's 'poems test the reach of human experience and knowledge, exposing the uncertainties and gaps at the heart of her poetic endeavour through their engagement with religious themes' (2011: 3-4). The poetic elegy is in a permanent condition of approaching its object without ever overtaking, and it might be precisely this repeated movement – never twice the same, but always confronting the

[6] Poem 1691, in *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Johnson lists the date of first publication of Dickinson's poem as 1914, but is unable to give a date for the earliest known manuscript. He refers to the period 'between 1858 and 1865' as 'the years of great creativeness' for Dickinson (1970: viii). Dickinson's biographer Richard B. Sewall writes: 'The great bulk of her poems was found in her room after her death [in 1886]. They were in a bewildering state. Some were in final form; there were many semifinal drafts, with variant readings undecided upon; there were hundreds of scraps and jottings; and there were almost no dates' (1994: 6).

gap between desire and consummation – that supplies the life force of a genre founded on loss and failure. What is permanently beyond the scope and accomplishment of the poet accelerates the desire to grasp what is out of reach. But beyond declaring the overtakelessness of the dead, how can language attempt to capture the ineffable?

This question emerges in Maurice Blanchot's reading of Orpheus and Eurydice. The myth relates Orpheus's descent into the Underworld to recover the dead Eurydice by leading her out of darkness and back into the world of daylight – a narrative framework that creates an obvious parallel with the work of the elegist. But the mission ends in failure when Orpheus succumbs to the temptation to turn around and look back at her – the expressly forbidden act that results in the second, and this time permanent, disappearance of Eurydice. Orpheus fails to recreate the dead in her former incarnation because he tries to possess and encompass – figured by means of his forbidden gaze – that which cannot be encompassed. In 'Orpheus's Gaze', Blanchot suggests that Eurydice can be figured as a signification of overtakelessness when he writes that 'she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend' (1982: 171). That is to say, the profound obscurity of the dead will both draw the elegy in the direction of the dead, and make it impossible for the elegy to bring the mystery of the dead to light. Blanchot continues:

> Orpheus's work does not consist in ensuring this point's approach by descending into the depths. His *work* is to bring it back to the light of day and to give it form, shape, and reality in the day. Orpheus is capable of everything, except of looking this point in the face, except of looking at the center of the night in the night. He can descend toward it; he can […] draw it to him and lead it with him upward, but only by turning away from it. This turning away is the only way it can be approached.
>
> (1982: 171)

The central dilemma faced by elegy, and indeed by any poem in pursuit of that which it wishes 'to grasp and bring to light' (Newman 1996: 158), is that the poem can only give shape to its desired object by 'turning away' from the object. This action of averting the gaze, as enacted by Orpheus, is in terms of the elegy an artificial representation that cannot approach the reality of who the elegised *was* – a corporeal, living presence – and who the elegised *is* – an indefinable absence. What the poem cannot do is look 'at the center of the night in the night' because overtakelessness encloses the dead – it is a concept that can be recognised and explored by the poem, even as the poem is forced to

admit that it surpasses anything the poem can achieve. Consequently, the elegist suffers a second loss as the absent dead are cloaked in a metaphorical night that encloses the irretrievable fullness of those who are sought. The limitations of language, accentuated by its emotional and physical distance from that to which it is attending, mean that the dead are described by the elegy in such a way that might suggest a recapturing of the lost, but is in fact simply a confirmation of what has been lost.

There is in elegy an irreconcilability between the poet's desire to bring the dead to presence – whether that is the other in their previously living form or the other in 'the plenitude of her death' (Blanchot 1982: 172) – and the inability of the poem to surpass its own restrictive boundaries and access 'the center of the night in the night' that harbours the dead. Or, as Blanchot puts it, Orpheus 'loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song' (1982: 173). This incompatibility brings a tension to the poem that begins to describe the elegist's encounter with overtakelessness – the desire to put under pressure, if not overcome, the barriers that prevent full access to the dead. Walter A. Strauss describes the impulse that lies behind Orpheus's turning to look at Eurydice as '[t]he poet's […] desire […] to *see*, not to sing' (1971: 256), foregrounding the tension between the potential impulse of the elegy to achieve a proximity to the dead, and the ultimate dissatisfaction that results from a recognition of the surplus of the dead that the poem must leave behind. But given this recognition, what are the negotiations that the living might make with overtakelessness, and how are they played out in elegiac form?

In Chapter 2, there is a moment in Mary Jo Bang's address to her dead son in 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' when the tension between seeing and singing rises to the surface: 'How can I not reach where you are || And pull you back' (2007: 24). The elegist's frustration at the poem's inability to return the dead to her proximity echoes Orpheus's ill-fated attempt to lead Eurydice back out of the Underworld and into his grasp. Orpheus's impulse, like that of Bang, is to move towards the dead – to reach forward – in order to then engineer the reverse movement of the dead, a pulling back towards himself, and ultimately a return to the fullness of presence. But Bang's formulation of her phrase, 'How can I not […]' indicates not only the failure of the poem to accomplish its pursuit of the dead, but also her exasperation and confusion

about why exactly this might be the case – suggesting that Bang's question has been prompted by many unsuccessful visits to the metaphorical Underworld.

Does the overtakelessness of the dead supply the lifeblood of the elegy? That is to say, if it were not for the tension that exists between the artistic impulse to recover the other and the subsequent realisation that the other is irrecoverable, would the elegy lack a driving dynamic that continues to push it forward towards the dead? Is the relation between the living and the dead, as enacted in the scene of the poem, founded on the concept of overtakelessness? In Chapter 3, Anne Carson's consideration of her brother's 'muteness' as a symbol of his resistance to being fully known prompts her to recall in *Nox*: '"Overtakelessness" is a word told me by a philospher [*sic*] once: *das Unumgängliche* – that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them.'[7] The irresistible appeal of the dead is captured by their figuring as an unavoidable presence that remains ultimately elusive, so that the absent other 'cannot be avoided or seen to the back of'; the elegy must sing of the dead, even as it accepts that it cannot see its object. Of course, the elegy has a way of seeing, but this precludes an overtaking of the dead – an all-embracing view – so that they might be 'seen to the back of', as Carson puts it.

Carson's reference to the German word '*das Unumgängliche*' points to an essay by Martin Heidegger, 'Science and Reflection', in which Heidegger observes the surplus that is always left behind when science endeavours to encompass nature. He observes that nature is 'not to be "gotten around"' by the science that aims to explain it because the action of moving toward and securing nature 'in its objectness' – that is, the fixing of a particular representation – at any one time means that many of the multiple 'presences' of nature are not fully grasped and illuminated: '[N]ature is not to be gotten around inasmuch as objectness as such prevents the representing and securing that correspond to it from ever being able to encompass the essential fullness of nature'. Heidegger remarks that nature, along with 'man, history, language', are areas of knowledge that the respective sciences 'can never *encompass* by means of their representing' because what they move towards is 'that which is not to be gotten around [*Unumgängliche*]'

[7] Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) is unpaginated throughout.

(1977: 174-77).[8] The movement towards what cannot be overtaken is driven by an impulse to collect facts, as Carson puts it – an action that in one sense makes the elegy a mode of inquiry.

The accumulation of knowledge suggests that part of the elegist's task is to gather resources for a problematic encounter with the dead that implicitly denotes the obstacles faced by the living poet. If overtakelessness is an unyielding barrier – Heidegger refers to that which cannot be got round as 'intractable and inaccessible' (1977: 177) – then how might the elegist approach the concept? The asking of questions – demonstrated by Bang's rhetorical cry of frustration, above – might be a natural first step, but a question does not guarantee an answer; nor does it guarantee that, if an answer is forthcoming, it will be comprehensible. Elegy's impulse of inquiry, not least the question of the whereabouts of the dead, is met by the absence of a satisfactory response because the person towards whom the question is directed is, as Bang observes in an interview, 'the one who has gone'. The poet adds that in a repeated effort to get round what cannot be got round, the elegist experiences 'the horrible hamster wheel of grief' (Kronovet 2008).

The elegist's repeated re-enactment of a movement towards the dead – though redolent with grief, in Bang's particular case – might offer some promise of an engagement with the overtakelessness that encloses the absent other. Dean Young alludes to a possible function of the elegy in its action of 'connecting you to what can't be grasped' (2005: 84).[9] That which 'can't be grasped' is the previous corporeal reality of the elegised, and a comprehension of exactly what constitutes their present absence. But Young's apparent oxymoron suggests that what might be available for the poet is the capacity to demonstrate the hiddenness of the dead so that overtakelessness is registered as a presence on the page. In this way, the elegy might move towards an understanding of its relationship with overtakelessness, even if it cannot overcome the barrier that overtakelessness erects around the dead.

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[8] In his translation of Heidegger's essay in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, William Lovitt notes that '*Unumgängliche*' is 'built on the stem of the verb *gehen* (to go)' (1977: 177). The German word 'unumgänglich', which translates as 'unavoidable', derives from the verb 'umgehen', meaning 'go (a)round', <http://www.wordreference.com/deen/umgehen> [accessed 6 July 2014]. In the Preface to the above volume, Lovitt quotes from Heidegger's notes at the end of his 1954 work *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske): '"Science and Reflection" ["Wissenschaft und Besinnung"]: Lecture, in its present version given in August, 1954, before a small group, in preparation for […] conference in Munich' (1977: ix-xi).

[9] 'Elegy on Toy Piano', in *Elegy on Toy Piano*.

Mark Doty attempts such an illustration by means of a metaphor when he observes rows of dead mackerel laid on ice in a Massachusetts grocery store:

> Even now
> they seem to be bolting
>
> forward, heedless of stasis.

(1996: 13)[10]

Doty suggests one aspect of the dichotomy between the dead and the living, as perceived by the elegist: in the store, the fish are literally fixed in front of him – just as the dead are fixed in language by the poem. But in the poet's mind, the mackerel – and by implication the elegised dead – are streaming ahead, oblivious to the 'stasis' of corporeal death and the inability of the elegist's language to grasp the dead, who are 'bolting || forward'. The living are fixed on earth, viewing the corporeal remains, but unable to reach the dead. Furthermore, the elegy is fixed in its space on the page: it is visible and static, but it is trying to make a connection with that which is invisible and fluid. Using language, Doty demonstrates the presence of that which is missed by the poem's linguistic representation – an appearance that Heidegger describes in the context of the scientific representation of nature as 'the hidden fullness of its coming to presence' (1977: 174).

Given the constraints under which language operates, are there ways in which the elegist might explore what constitutes overtakelessness by combining the verbal and the visual? In Chapter 1, Susan Howe's poetic practice of entering the archives of lost others in order to retrieve portions of text appears to replicate the movements of Orpheus in his efforts to bring the dead back to light. But Howe's subsequent transplantation of often unassimilable fragments into her word-collages suggests a foregrounding of the incompleteness and incomprehensibility of the dead; that is to say, her retrieval of a trace of the dead, rather than some version of a whole, may serve to remind the reader of that which must be left behind in any action of retrieval. In this way, the overtakelessness of the dead is figured by an amorphous collection of words and indefinable marks (Figure 1, p. 26).

[10] 'A Display of Mackerel', in *Atlantis*.

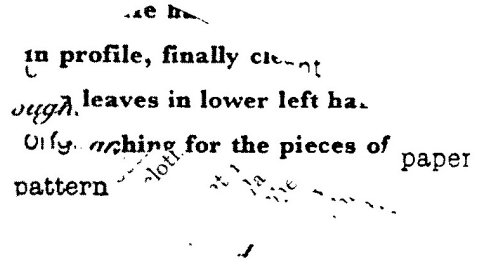

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Figure 1: 'Frolic Architecture', in *That This*, p. 48

Howe's innovative lexical shape in Figure 1 – incorporating discrete typefaces that intersect with and obscure each other – refuses linear coherence and an easily encompassed narrative. The reader is compelled to attend to the unfamiliar appearance – as well as the sounds – of individual words and marks, rather than reaching for a long-held attachment to meaning and sense. In this way, the otherness of the words – and therefore the otherness and overtakelessness of the other – is foregrounded when language is made unfathomable or disappears into the white space of the page.

Howe's cluster of textual fragments is enclosed by a significant expanse of white space, which may in itself be taken as a performance of overtakelessness: the representation of silence and nothingness is perhaps an attempt on the part of the poet to foreground that which cannot be expressed or encompassed. Working within the constraints of the page, blankness is for the elegy a potent means of suggesting 'the presence of […] infinite absence' that Orpheus witnesses when he turns towards Eurydice (Blanchot 1982: 172). It might be construed that Howe's small island of text is in the process of being eroded by the sea of whiteness that surrounds it; but what are the implications for the poem, and its encounter with overtakelessness, if this view is reversed – that it is language that is effacing the void, and not vice versa?

In his discussion of the poetics of loss, Richard Stamelman remarks that '[e]very work hides something that it keeps silent, that it leaves unspoken', adding that '[t]his lack or void, unexpressed because covered over by the perceivable expression of the writing, yearns to be spoken' (1990: 30).[11] Stamelman draws attention to the part of the dead that remains in obscurity and suggests that the elegy might actively suppress and silence the dead – figured as a 'lack or void' – through the 'expression' of its own voice. Given this inference, it can be argued that the elegist's encounter with overtakelessness is further problematised by the unavoidable presence of the self. The void that constitutes the other – and into which the other disappears – is inevitably 'covered over' to a degree by subjective expression precisely *because* the other exists as a void; the voice of the other depends for its articulation on the imagination and action of the self. Is it not more

[11] Part 2 and Part 3 of Stamelman's *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* are devoted to studies of specific writers. But in Part 1, the author discusses the nature of poetic loss in more general terms.

accurate to say, therefore, that the yearnings of the elegised other are simply a version of the longings of the self, driven by a complex range of emotions such as guilt, anger, or grief?

To what extent is the elegist's impulse to take action on behalf of the dead complicated by a more narcissistic demand to attend to the self? In this Introduction, I have already touched on the imagined demise and disintegration of the self in Dean Young's work (Chapter 4). In Chapter 2, Mary Jo Bang's declared intention that she wanted her poems in *Elegy* 'to accurately measure the emotion' (Kronovet 2008) could be construed more as a desire for self-protection – to employ the elegies as a regulatory valve for her grief – that might hinder her attempts to reach the lost other. And in Chapter 1, I examine the extent to which Susan Howe's archival exploration – in particular her tracing of the footsteps of her father – is in effect a search for her own origins, a knowledge of what constitutes the self.

It appears that the elegist's negotiation with the overtakelessness of the dead becomes also a negotiation with the demands of the self. In this light, David Kennedy poses a question that 'the elegist always has to answer: […] How do I balance writing about the deceased with the fact that writing grief makes me my own subject?' (2007: 1). If the emotions of the self are liable to make still more elusive a satisfactory capture of the other, then an elegist's possible response to Kennedy's question is to efface their own grief or at least claim that this is being performed. In a discussion of her work *Nox*, the primary text that I examine in Chapter 3, Anne Carson remarks that the book is 'not about grief', but rather about 'understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages', adding that '[e]xploring grief would have made it a book about me, and I didn't want that' (Sehgal 2011).[12]

Alternatively, in partial answer to Kennedy's question, the seeing of the other might be rather less obstructed by the presence of the self when the elegist foregrounds the words of the other rather than those of the self – as in the example, above, of Howe's textual collage (Figure 1). Howe's work frequently presents a radical difficulty for the reader that reflects the opacity of the other; in recognising this difficulty, the reader is given a

[12] Parul Sehgal's online article, 'Anne Carson: Evoking the Starry Lad', was originally published as 'Evoking the Starry Lad her Brother was', *The Irish Times*, 19 March 2011, Books, p. 50.

potential insight into the profound problems faced by the elegist in their negotiations with the overtakelessness of the dead. Derek Attridge's observations of the possible far-reaching effects of a particular genus of writing are pertinent in this respect:

> [T]here is […] a sense in which the formally innovative work, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the most sharply challenging […] ethical demand. […] To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand how little you understand me, translate my untranslatability, learn me by heart and thus learn the otherness that inhabits the heart.
>
> (2004: 130-31)

Attridge posits the poem as a representation of the other in a way that is central to the aims of my thesis. In response to the question of what can be done for the dead, which I noted at the beginning of this Introduction, perhaps one of the most pressing concerns as a starting point for the elegist is to have an appreciation of the other as *other*; that is to say, to recognise that the dead cannot be encompassed or known fully by the self. Given the elusiveness of the dead, the challenge for the elegist centres on a question of what negotiations the poem – and through the poem, the reader – can make with overtakelessness. The problem faced by the elegist is to discover a way of working with the fact of overtakelessness, even as the elegy is responding to an impulse to somehow find a way around it – to achieve the impossible task of reaching the unreachable with the principal tool of language. If the absent other is incomprehensible and untranslatable, can the elegist at least demonstrate the existence and the constituents of that untranslatability on the page? And what are the ethical dimensions of a relationship enacted by a literary work that is called to observe a 'unique event' – not only of the other, but also of the death that has removed the other from the known world?

In order to explore these and other key questions, the core material of each chapter is constituted by detailed analyses of particular poems, with the intention of positioning elegy in its most fundamental sense as an encounter between the printed matter of the page and the amorphous matter of the dead. I aim to show how each poet's use of verbal and visual material – and, on occasion, the actual physical matter of the text – shapes the elegist's intricate negotiation with overtakelessness. Further, I will demonstrate the tensions and nuances that arise in contrasting forms of poetic expression as they point towards, and engage with, a concept that demonstrates the

ways in which the dead are beyond capture by language. Given this latter point, it is important to point out the obvious caveat that my readings of particular poems do not claim to be definitive and that my analyses of poets' work are conducted in the knowledge that any given elegy – like the dead that it approaches – cannot be encompassed; the elegy, like the absent other that it attempts to recover, will always retain a surplus that must be left behind.

Peter Middleton points out that a poem's 'meaning', such as it can ever be determined, 'is not already there latent in the pattern of words', but rather develops by means of 'an intersubjective process extended over time, many individuals, and only ever partially available for cognitive reflection' (2005: xv). Given this argument, a study of elegy must take into account not only the difficulty of approaching the genre as a whole – bearing in mind Shaw's observation, above, of the distance between a desired 'knowledge' and the actuality of 'learned ignorance' – but also any study's inability to encompass what might be construed as each individual elegy's significance. Middleton's observation of the inevitable restrictions attached to an attempted explication of the poem via an examination of its 'pattern of words' adds a further barrier to understanding a genre that is founded on loss and incomprehension – the desired object of the elegy, like the 'meaning' of the poem, is 'only ever partially available'. In this respect, any analysis of the poem must accept its own incompleteness, but as a potential means of broadening critical understanding Middleton proposes a consideration of the poem's 'long biography' (2005: 5), which takes account of the distance that the poem travels from its original incarnation and the subsequent development of discrete strands of meaning at different sites:

> The distances within contemporary culture across which texts move greatly increase the temporal depth that helps constitute the textual condition, especially of poetry. Accelerated reception often means that a text can now have an active reading life within many different parallel microhistories, which sometimes precipitate as reviews, essays, other poems, or just conversation directed specifically at an articulated response to the text.
>
> (2005: 12)

It is my intention in this thesis to demonstrate the ways in which an analysis of individual contemporary elegies, and therefore an understanding of the genre that they constitute, can be enriched by a consideration of some of what Middleton terms the

poem's 'different parallel microhistories'. In terms of the 'textual condition' of the work that I have selected for study, my attention is primarily directed at its verbal and visual performance on the page – that is, the ways in which the creative labour of the poet enables the poem's elegiac work. But I will show that this performance is illuminated and informed by a consideration of a number of different areas of activity that are not strictly confined to what Middleton describes as 'a singular, solitary encounter between one printed manifestation of the text and one sensitive reader' (2005: xii). In other words, beyond the printed matter on the page, what particular sites of study might inform the work from which they develop? In light of this question, I will consider: commentary on the poems and individual aspects of poetic practice in essays, reviews and interviews – by critics and, on occasion, by the authors themselves; relevant biographical and historical material, as it pertains to particular aspects of the poets' work, and the ways in which that material might affect the reception of texts, and cause the reader to have particular expectations regarding poetic mourning and the display of grief; the social, political and cultural contexts from which particular pieces of work emerge; the materiality of the poets' work, both in terms of its attention to objects, and its own physical structure; and the poem in its performance as historical document, in conjunction with documentary analysis by other writers and social commentators of relevant events in wider American society.

In the ways stated above, I aim to consider '[t]he distances […] across which texts move', as Middleton puts it, and to give an impression of the breadth of activity that is generated by individual works. Further, by means of a close analysis of what might be called the poem's primary and secondary sites of performance, I will also show the ways in which ideas of distance – along with implicit, and occasionally explicit, notions of defeated attempts at closeness – are inherent in a genre that in its most fundamental sense responds to an impulse to recover an absent other. Overtakelessness foregrounds the idea of a frustrated pursuit – the divide that separates a potential desire for presence and the ultimate recognition of an irremediable absence – and presents itself as a condition that begins to describe the dead and the territory that they inhabit. I am particularly interested in the work that takes place in the notional space between the poet and that which the poet pursues; the ways in which the poem encounters what cannot be overtaken, and the steps it takes to negotiate and engage with that which is unavoidable, but cannot be encompassed. I aim to demonstrate that what separates the

living and the dead – and therefore sets in motion the work of elegy – is a conceptual figuring of beyondness that lures the poet with a promise of closeness even as it shows the impossibility of retrieving the dead in their essential fullness.

By means of a consideration of poetic distance, and an examination of the specific strands of separateness that inhabit elegy, I will also demonstrate the ways in which each principal poet in my thesis – although showcasing in their work radical differences in practice, style and content – engages in close dialogue with their counterparts in other chapters. In this way, I hope, the reader may gain valuable insights into the interconnecting threads of poetic loss and mourning. The arrangement of my thesis, which takes one principal poet for each chapter, is intended to enable a depth of examination of each poet that would not be possible if the thesis were instead arranged by themes pertinent to the study of elegy. Accordingly, this thesis explores not only the complexities of contemporary elegy – opened up by the concept of overtakelessness – but also engages in a study of five contemporary North American poets who are living and working in the present day.

Synopsis of Chapters

My thesis begins with a retrieval of the dead. In Chapter 1, Susan Howe enters the archive – in a move that appears to parallel Orpheus's descent into the Underworld to recover Eurydice – in search of traces of personally known and unknown others from American history. Howe responds to an ethical impulse, illustrated by Emmanuel Levinas's theoretical argument regarding the coexistence of the self and the other, to protect the alterity of the other. Her poetic intention is to execute a partial recovery of lost individuals from the enclosure of repressed cultural and historical memory. In Howe's textual collages and opaque poems, fragmented words and unassimilable marks positioned in an expanse of white space configure a visual conception of overtakelessness that incorporates a recognition on the part of the poet of what remains beyond her reach. Howe's attempts to figure incomplete others as textual, visual, and acoustic traces demonstrates the pressure that is brought to bear on language by a poetic encounter with the dead and a negotiation with the overtakelessness that encloses them.

The question of language comes into sharp focus in Chapter 2, where Mary Jo Bang discovers in *Elegy* that words are unequal to her poetic attempts to recover her dead son and to give an accurate account of her grief. Denise Riley's work on language and interpellation, in particular her examination of the precarious foundation of the first-person pronoun, highlights a specific fault-line in the territory of poetic mourning – if the elegist is not in control of her own words, how can she give shape to the elusive dead? Bang's attempted preservation of her son in the aspic of fixed moments from the past represents an attempt to circumvent the reality of his loss and preserve both the self and the other from the stark reality of overtakelessness, but risks placing the elegised and her own emotion at an even further remove. She also exposes the elegy to questions regarding the reader's potential demand for an authentic display of grief, especially in view of the autobiographical source of Bang's poems. Given Bang's experience of the unreliability of language in her encounter with overtakelessness, is it possible for the elegist to adopt an alternative approach to the dead?

In Chapter 3, Anne Carson's *Nox* is also brought into being by an event of personal loss, but the author's approach to her subject stands in sharp contrast to that of Bang. Carson's scrapbook of photocopied objects enclosed in a box gives the elegy a material quality and foregrounds a particular encounter with the dead – personal relics acquire a marked resonance and presence, such that they appear to detach themselves from her brother and displace him as the work's primary focus. Carson's interaction with such items as a personal letter, photographs, and postage stamps becomes an examination of the overtakelessness that these objects carry into the space of her work. Her translation of an elegy by Catullus, and Jean Laplanche's exploration of the processes of psychoanalytic translation, afford valuable insights into Carson's engagement with overtakelessness, to which the poet makes explicit reference when she contemplates her brother's muteness. Carson's decontextualised and enigmatic material imparts an emotional distance that foregrounds her own form of silence, corresponding with her observation that *Nox* is not intended to be a book about personal grief.

Carson's intention to efface her own presence appears to be inverted by Dean Young in Chapter 4. In *Elegy on Toy Piano*, the poet's attention to an increasingly elusive self suggests that the disjunction between the elegist and the elegised is founded as much on the unreachability of the self as it is on the absence of the other. Young's absurd humour

and fantastical scenarios of annihilation might be intended to diminish the reality of loss in a way that undermines its deleterious effects. D. W. Winnicott's theories of child development prove useful in shedding light on Young's negotiation with overtakelessness, as the poet attempts to transform the scene of elegy into a space of play where his own reincarnation becomes possible. But Young's apparent efforts to gain mastery over the chaotic scene of death are undermined by the repeated fragmentation of the self and the ultimate decomposition of the poet's alter ego in a meltdown that also commits his work to destruction. Young demonstrates through the creation of an imagined crisis that the elegy's response to death incorporates not only a reaching towards the other, but also a turning back towards the self that further problematises an encounter with the overtakelessness of the dead.

The idea of disintegration is picked up in Chapter 5 by Mark Doty, but whereas Young shapes a fictional crisis, Doty writes in the midst of an actual catastrophe – the AIDS epidemic – that incorporates private and public loss. Heteronormative society's application of a further layer of otherness to the individual and collective elegised represents a social and political dimension of overtakelessness for the elegist, as the homosexual AIDS victim is made an illegitimate subject for mourning. The lexical density of Doty's poetry, rich in elaborate imagery and extended metaphors, suggests that an encounter with overtakelessness – and the competing claims of the individual and the community for recognition – should be placed in the context of an understanding that it is precisely decay and incipient death that afford the quality of aesthetic brilliance. Doty proposes that the elegist's negotiation with overtakelessness might accommodate a recognition – opened up by Georges Bataille's exploration of the relationship between death and eroticism – that death liberates the individual from a life of restrictive singularity and discontinuity.

These synopses begin to show the range of different stylistic approaches to the creation of contemporary elegy and an idea of the variety of impulses that bring the poet to the page. Beyond a broad description of poetic elegy as the stage for an engagement with loss, it is a scene in which a number of intricate encounters are played out – from the deeply personal to the political – serving to illustrate what is at stake for each poet when they initiate their work. The multivalent work of contemporary elegy – that is, what brings it into being, its constitution on the page, and the nature of its performance at the

site of its original incarnation and beyond – foregrounds the complexity of the poet's response to loss and the intractable question of what might be done for the dead. In order to answer this question, and to try and understand what constitutes lost others, the poet should perhaps commence by considering the remains of the dead, and it is at a particular site of retrieval that my study of contemporary elegy begins.

Chapter 1

'Pursuing Shadows and Things': Susan Howe's Retrieval of the Other

Introduction

Elegy begins as a response to the question of the other. That is to say, what constitutes the dead, now that they have been removed from the known world? Their irremediable absence, and the unassimilable condition of their non-existence, bring into focus a characteristic of alterity that calls for the elegist's attention. This in turn prompts a question *from* the other to the poet: given my otherness, how will you respond to the demands of poetic mourning? Or, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, 'what is to be done for the dead' (Spargo 2004: 138) now that they are deprived of agency and a voice? If both the other, and the death of the other, represent 'a unique event' (Attridge 2004: 131), then what are the obligations that the poetic elegy must attempt to meet in formulating its response to this event?

In considering the complex problem of how to respond to the event of death and of what might be done for the other, elegy opens a debate about what constitutes the relationship between the living and the dead, and the potential ethical dimensions of any action that is taken by the self on behalf of those who are permanently absent. In his discussion of the 'manifold relations the living maintain with the giant family of the dead in Western culture', Robert Pogue Harrison elaborates his initial premise that 'humanity […] is a way of being mortal and relating to the dead', an action that Harrison regards as crucial to being 'human' because:

> As human beings we are born of the dead – of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional, legal, cultural, and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn.
>
> (2003: xi)

Through the idea of a lineage – the dead as ancestors of the living – Harrison suggests an ethical responsibility to the dead; he adds that '[e]verywhere one looks across the spectrum of human culture one finds what we might call an *obligation* to the corpse, or the remains thereof'. How is this '*obligation*' defined? In Harrison's terms, 'it has its basis

in a human imperative to dispose of the dead deliberately and ceremonially' (2003: 143), that is to say, to bury the corporeal remains. But the act of burial also resonates with the concealment of grief and the repression of mourning that is inlaid in American society. For Susan Howe, who enters the archive in search of traces of lost unknowns, historical figures, and her own ancestry – thus arriving at the page long after the event of death and physical burial – the obligation of the elegist might be described as an ethical disinterment: to bring the dead out of obscurity. Howe's poetic practice of looking *back* into the archive in order to re-present and rediscover the dead in the present is perhaps a response to the foundation of American culture 'in the almost exclusively forward-looking orientation of a long pioneer experience' (Sacks 1985: 313) and America's contemporary cultural edict that declares 'grief an embarrassment to be deplored' (Gilbert 2007: 411). Howe's retrieval of the dead from the archive might be a way of recovering particular individuals – and in a wider sense, a community of lost others – from the enclosure of repressed cultural memory.

The archival exploration that is central to Howe's poetic practice is an apposite point at which to begin this thesis because it foregrounds the notion of a connective between the past and the present, and the living and the dead, which might form the basis for the work of elegy to come into being.[1] In one sense, the archive can be figured as the ground that the dead occupy, and it is here that a sense of the 'worlds they brought into being', as Harrison puts it, can be approached. For Howe, the idea of 'cultural, and psychological legacies' incorporates both a private and a public dimension. Later in this chapter, I will explore the ways in which her investigation of her father's history, and his fascination with the Puritans, is inextricably bound up with a search for America's origins, and ultimately with a question of the self – how she arrived in the archives looking for the origins of lost others.

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[1] Howe's interest in the archive spans a number of texts in which figures from American history serve as inspiration for her poetry and prose: 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', and 'Thorow', both included in *Singularities* (Wesleyan University Press: 1990), feature New England minister Reverend Hope Atherton (1646-1677), and author Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) respectively. *Pierce-Arrow* (New Directions: 1999) is inspired by Howe's exploration of the manuscripts of philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914); and *The Midnight* (New Directions: 2003) considers the life of Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) – who co-designed Central Park in New York City – as part of a wide-ranging exploration of Howe's own place in the archive via her Irish ancestry. Howe's *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Wesleyan University Press: 1993) examines American literary history via the work of, among others, Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), Cotton Mather (1663-1728), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Herman Melville (1819-1891), and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), who is the focal point for Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (New Directions: 1985).

For a poet in search of the past and those who occupy it, the archive might present itself as a natural starting point – it is in this space that a connection with the dead may be achieved by means of an encounter with their archived documents, the material remnants of lost others. Howe remarks in an interview that '[t]here's a level at which words are spirit and paper is skin. That's the fascination of archives' (McLane and Howe 2012). The possibility of an engagement with the body of the other – in the dual sense of a body of work, as well as the textual remains of the dead – is enticing; as Howe puts it, 'the material – the fragment, the piece of paper – is all we have to connect to the dead' (McLane and Howe 2012). But this 'fascination' is tempered with frustration. Ultimately, the archive presents itself as a tangible configuration of overtakelessness, luring the elegist into its liminal territory, but denying full assimilation of the desired object. In the enclosed space of the archive, what becomes evident to the explorer is the surplus of the excluded dead that cannot be found.

What remains for the poet who is intent on retrieving lost others from this crepuscular territory? In a move that appears to parallel Orpheus's descent into the Underworld to recover Eurydice by leading her out of darkness and back into the light, Howe retrieves linguistic fragments of the dead from the enclosure of the archive and reconfigures their words in a new space on the page. In the second section of her 2010 volume *That This*,[2] which I study in more detail later in this chapter, Howe presents a series of textual collages that are inspired by her visit to the Jonathan Edwards archive at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in New Haven[3] and her discovery of material written by Edwards's sister Hannah Edwards Wetmore – which in turn has been transcribed by Hannah's daughter, Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey. Subsequently, as she reveals in an interview, Howe transcribes Hannah Edwards's words, via her daughter, from copies in the library, and then cuts and pastes from her own copies into collages

[2] 'Frolic Architecture', in *That This*, pp. 37-95.

[3] Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Christian preacher and theologian, described as the 'greatest theologian and philosopher of British American Puritanism, stimulator of the religious revival known as the "Great Awakening" and one of the forerunners of the age of Protestant missionary expansion in the 19th century', <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/179857/Jonathan-Edwards> [accessed 12 November 2013]. The Jonathan Edwards Collection at the Beinecke, part of Yale University Library, 'consists of the great majority of Edwards' surviving manuscripts including over one thousand sermons, private theological and philosophical notebooks, correspondence, printed materials, and artifacts', <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/jonathan-edwards-collection> [accessed 12 November 2013].

'with a mix of sources from other texts' (Howe 2011).[4] In the process of intertwining various source texts, Howe foregrounds the tension between individual and communal loss that sits at the heart of elegy as the textual remains of lost others mingle in the freshly conceived space of Howe's poetic page.

In *That This*, the collages of 'Frolic Architecture' are immediately preceded by an essay about the death of Howe's husband Peter Hare, in which memories of Hare are juxtaposed with recollections of Howe's visit to the Beinecke and her excavations of the Edwards archive.[5] In 'The Disappearance Approach', this intersection between individuality and communality – the private and public ground that Howe occupies in the archive, which she transfers to her work – is brought into focus when Howe reflects on her poetic practice: 'More and more I have the sense of being present at a point of absence where crossing centuries may prove to be like crossing languages' (2010: 31). Howe's elegiac work, which emanates from the archive, is a contemporary frontier between the known – her father and her husband – and the unknown, the wider community of the dead who have been silenced and obscured over the course of centuries in America's historical and cultural memory. The process of 'crossing languages', executed in *That This* by Howe's attention to verbal and visual elements in her textual collages – in which the words of the dead come *across* each other on the page – denotes a dialogue between the individual and the communal, and an intersection of the past and the present. Furthermore, the idea of crossing languages indicates a sense of the inquiry and incomprehension that inhabit an elegiac encounter between the living and the dead.

Howe's textual collages – which incorporate disconnected phrases, fragmented words and miscellaneous, unrecognisable marks, suspended in the white space of the page – indicate that the elegy, like Orpheus, fails to recover the dead in their former incarnation as a living form or in 'the plenitude of her death' (Blanchot 1982: 172).

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[4] Aside from particular sections of *That This* and *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, which I explore in more detail in this chapter, notable examples of Howe's textual collages can also be found in: 'Secret History of the Dividing Line' (first published as a stand-alone volume in 1978 by Telephone Books), in *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* (New Directions: 1996), pp. 87-122; 'Thorow', in *Singularities* (Wesleyan University Press: 1990), pp. 39-59; 'A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike' (pp. 45-82), and 'Melville's Marginalia' (pp. 83-150), both included in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New Directions: 1993).

[5] 'The Disappearance Approach', in *That This*, pp. 9-35. The dedication on the title page of this section reads: '*In memory of Peter H. Hare (1935-2008)*'.

Rather, Howe's presentation of incomplete and unassimilable shards of text positions the dead as a community of lost others that cannot be encompassed. Howe's work, which frequently rejects coherence and a discernible narrative, presents a radical complexity for the reader that reflects the intricate nature of absent others and the difficulties faced by the poet as she aims to incorporate the dead in the space of her work. Rachel Tzvia Back remarks of Howe's work that it 'formally enacts the arduous process of tracking back through thick and overgrown landscapes in search of history's missing' (2002: 11), implying that the work of elegy might face particular obstacles in even encountering the dead, let alone contemplating how it might incorporate them once they have been retrieved.

Howe's retrieval of the dead from long-forgotten archives suggests that the elegist must contemplate the possibility that the absent other has been extinguished from memory. This loss can take place in a private context – the closest family and friends of the other will eventually disappear. But from a wider perspective, the dead may be erased in the public consciousness and subjected to enclosure in controlled, categorised spaces that enforce their own hierarchies, resulting in particular individuals being effectively reburied. When Howe visits the Jonathan Edwards archive, she reveals that she 'came upon Jonathan Edwards's sister Hannah by chance when I slipped her "private writings" out of a folder in the Beinecke Reading Room at Yale' (McLane and Howe 2012). The enclosure of the 'folder' that Howe discovers is a microcosm of the archive, where 'history's missing', as Back describes them, are lost from public view.

The elegy cannot encompass the whole of the other who is lost, but loss 'leaves its enigmatic trace' (Butler 2003: 468), which in the case of Hannah Edwards's textual fragments is made still more mysterious by their description, above, as '"private writings"'. When Howe retrieves slivers of these writings and incorporates them in her work, she demonstrates that the dead are only recoverable as a trace that denotes precisely by what is missing – and what cannot necessarily be understood – the excess of the dead that escapes the elegy. In a collage from *That This* (Figure 2, p. 41), the most legible, coherent textual trace, 'pursuing shadows & things' (2010: 62), approaches a description of Howe's poetic practice, whereby Hannah Edwards's words are used by Howe to indicate the poet's own pursuit of lost others.

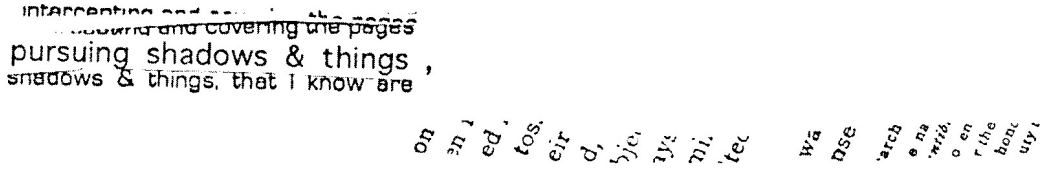

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Figure 2: 'Frolic Architecture', in *That This*, p. 62

In Figure 2, Howe suggests the elusiveness of the dead by means of an overriding ambiguity in her word-collage. The word 'things' is as instrumental in conveying uncertainty as the 'shadows' that precede it; even when its non-specificity is contradicted by the decisive statement 'I know', the resolution to the incomplete construction 'I know are' is lost in the emptiness of the page. The second occurrence of the phrase 'shadows & things', below the first, is partially eroded and appears in a smaller typeface, implying that the practical reality of a pursuit of the dead is that it lacks the clarity of the statement of intent to pursue 'shadows & things'. Howe's pursuit of absent others is effectively obstructed, just as the phrase 'intercepting and covering the pages' at the top left of Howe's collage is intercepted in its own progress across the page by a fault line that fractures the typeface, thus demonstrating that the words of the dead – and therefore the dead themselves – resist straightforward assimilation by the elegy.

On the right-hand side of Figure 2, Howe metaphorises a pursuit of the other in a separate block of text that through its configuration is suggestive of a path that cuts its way through the white space of the page. But the visually suggested promise of a successful route to assimilation of the dead is defeated by Howe's textual manipulation that both fragments words and upends them, so that language – a means of connection and communication – actually pursues a path that rejects any notion of coherent accommodation. In an essay written prior to the publication of *That This*, Mandy Bloomfield notes of Howe's work that 'a highly attuned visual sensibility, manifested by textual arrangements that often disrupt the conventions of the printed page, has remained a characteristic feature of her poetic practice' (2009: 417). Howe's disruption is key: her collage rebels against the archive and its 'relentless ordering' (Collis 2006: 18) by positioning texts out of place and in an apparently chaotic universe. But Howe might also disrupt the expectations of the reader by demonstrating that lost others refuse a conventional linear reading on the page: some 'things' are being shaped, and they incorporate language, but language struggles to add to an understanding of what those shapes might be. In its own amorphous space that occupies a territory somewhere between poetry, prose, and visual art, Howe's work aims to counter the forces of categorisation that predominate in the archive. From a wider perspective, Howe suggests that those who are elegised defeat classification and capture by the elegist, whose own hopes for a recovery of the dead will be disrupted by an encounter with the

overtakelessness that encloses them. Howe indicates that the net result of what is known, is that the other cannot be known – or, at least, cannot be known easily.

Howe's use of white space, textual omissions, and interrupted phrases – as demonstrated in Figure 2 – enacts an elegiac encounter with the dead that aims for a partial recovery of lost others while simultaneously showing absence and fragmentation. Howe demonstrates that the elegy has an obligation to foreground otherness, even as it engages in a retrieval and incorporation of the dead. In this respect, the elegist's response to the question – and the implicit questioning – of the other might be figured as a response to 'the crisis of the other's value revealed by the event of death' (Spargo 2004: 138). How can this 'value' be understood, and in what ways could Howe's work be said to be directed towards its foregrounding and preservation?

The question of the value of the other – and Howe's response to the question of this value – is illuminated by Emmanuel Levinas's theoretical argument for an ethical treatment of the other. Levinas proposes that the otherness of the other – in Spargo's terms, 'the other's value' – should be preserved in order to observe the distinction between the self and the other, a relationship that explores a key question for Levinas, and by implication for Howe: 'How can I coexist with him and still leave his otherness intact?' (Levinas 1979: 13). That is to say, if the elegy is a space that enacts a relationship between the living and the dead – the coexistence of the elegist and the elegised – how can the elegist incorporate the elegised in that space without simply absorbing the other into the self? The most fundamental principle of coexistence, adds Levinas, is that the self remains separate from the other, so that the other does not 'dissolve into the same' (1979: 38). Such dissolution must be guarded against because '[t]he Other does not affect us as what must be surmounted, enveloped, dominated, but as other, independent of us' (1979: 89). For the elegist, the alterity of the other is brought into sharp focus by the unique event of death. The question of what can be done for the dead demands as a precondition that the dead are regarded to at least some extent as 'independent' of the elegist; otherwise, the elegist might be simply taking action on behalf of the self under the guise of enacting an interaction with the other.

If elegy begins as a response to the question of the other, it is simultaneously a response to questions about the self that are posed by the other. Colin Davis picks up the point in

his discussion of Levinas's theories about relations between the other and the self, when he remarks that '[e]thics, in Levinas' sense, […] is a point of contact with that which challenges me most radically […]. My response to the encounter defines my own ethical nature' (1996: 143). How will the elegist respond to the radical challenge not only of the alterity of the other, but also of death, which brings with it its own particular characteristic of otherness? Levinas defines 'ethics' as '[a] calling into question of the same' that 'is brought about by the other' (1979: 43), a notion that is problematised by the absence and unreachability of the dead. What constitutes an ethical response to a silent and unfathomable other?

Howe's transplantation of the fragmented words of others into the body of her own work is an act of incorporation that is intended to give a voice to the dead. Her response to the other consists in allowing the other to articulate their otherness in a way that is neither an extension of the words of the self, nor an assimilable or coherent whole that can be fully comprehended by the poet or the reader. For instance, in the title section of her 2007 volume *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe dramatises an encounter between a narrator and a community of lost others.[6] The Labadists of the title, a sect led by French separatist Jean de Labadie, settled in America in the late seventeenth century at a location 'where Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland meet', but '[i]n 1722, the community dissolved' (Howe 2007: 23-24), suggesting that Howe's own poetic tract – 44 short pieces, suspended in the white space of the page – is invoking a strange presence at a point of absence. The voice of the others appears to respond to the poet's exploration of the archive:

Oh—we are past saving
Aren't odd books full of us
What do you wake us for

(2007: 50)

The archived dead are 'past saving' – that is, their essential fullness is beyond the reach of Howe's work – but Howe is saving shards of the past by retrieving textual fragments

[6] 'Souls of the Labadie Tract', in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, pp. 21-71. The title section is preceded by 'Personal Narrative', a piece that Howe notes 'was originally written for a presidential panel called *The Sound of Poetry the Poetry of Sound* at the MLA convention 2006' (2007: 127). *Souls of the Labadie Tract* also includes a section of poems, '118 Westerly Terrace', and the textual collages of 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards', as well as two short prose pieces, both entitled '*Errand*'.

and reawakening lost others for a present-day audience. The Labadists represent a marginalised existence – both in the consciousness of contemporary America and at the time of their existence – a group whose 'experience of repeated persecutions in Europe, had led them to turn their eyes longingly towards the New World, in the hope that they might there discover a haven of refuge' (James 1899: 26). Does Howe's poetic space provide a contemporary refuge, centuries after the group's actual dissolution? Her work is an ethical act of poetic enablement that articulates the inarticulate; it simultaneously includes the dead within its space, even as it must accept that a portion of the dead must always be excluded from its field of operation. Howe endeavours to foreground what Levinas describes as '[t]he strangeness of the Other' (1979: 43), and in so doing she implicitly takes into account the ethical perspective of an encounter with loss – the question, 'What do you wake us for' is a moment of self-scrutiny, enacted through an imagined dialogue with the dead, that raises the question of elegiac obligation.

In a letter to Francine Loreau following the death of her husband Max Loreau, Jacques Derrida remarks that 'being at a loss […] has to do with a duty: to let the friend speak, to turn speech over to him, his speech, and especially not to take it from him, not to take it in his place' (2001: 95).[7] To be 'at a loss' addresses the condition of puzzlement and confusion in the face of death, and the question of how to respond to the crisis of the other's value. But the phrase also suggests the idea of being situated *at the site of* 'a loss', to be placed in a position that carries particular obligations and responsibilities – what Derrida terms 'a duty' of the mourner when faced by the death of the other. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Howe addresses these responsibilities through acts of incorporation that aim to foreground the otherness of the dead through language, sound and form. If the dead cannot be encompassed by the elegy, can the elegist allow inarticulacy and incompletion to be seen within the boundaries of the page? And what questions does Howe's work raise about the performance of language in the scene of elegy, given her poetic intention to avoid subsuming the voice of the other into the words of the self? But first, I will examine more closely the site of loss that provides the source material for Howe's acts of incorporation – the archive.

[7] Max Loreau (1928-1990), Belgian philosopher and poet. Derrida's letter to Loreau's wife, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas for Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, is dated 15 July 1991 (2001: 94).

The Archive

In 'Thorow', Susan Howe describes how in 1987 she went to live in an unfamiliar town where 'I didn't know anyone', and 'after the first panic of dislocation had subsided, I moved into the weather's fluctuation. Let myself drift in the rise and fall of light and snow, re-reading re-tracing once-upon' (1990b: 40). This experience serves as a useful metaphor for Howe's poetic practice, in which she enters the archive as a stranger in an unexplored territory and, rather than trying to defy the limits imposed on her as a documenter of the lost and the missing, she marks the incompleteness of the other in work that aims to foreground inarticulacy and 'dislocation'. Howe's work, which harbours recovered fragments of the other, is a 're-reading' of texts, part of an overall process of 're-tracing' the steps of those who have gone before – what might be termed the 'once-upon' of history. Howe suggests that the practice of elegy is a delicate process of uncovering the other, via historical material, while recognising and incorporating in her work the overtakelessness of the dead – the obscurations of the archive are pointed to, above, by the unpredictable weather, 'the rise and fall of light and snow'.

What constitutes the multilayered identity of the archive, and in what ways does Howe apply her ethical approach to this space? How does the archive formulate the action of elegy in its encounter with the dead? The archive is an inscribed territory, replete with documents, that is marked by lacunae, but Howe, the archival explorer, observes her obligation to the absent other by embracing – rather than resisting – this incompleteness. In the second stanza of a poem from the title section of *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe appears to address directly the contents of her own version of the Underworld:

You you loose ramshackle
extract poem do hold ashes
as history qua history half

(2007: 53)

A particular 'extract' in the archive may be 'loose', indicating that it is either difficult to trace or 'ramshackle', in a state of disrepair. That which is loose within the archive may also be ultimately lost to view and memory; the documents of the dead are notable for their omissions – absent pages and missing words – suggesting that a full account of the

dead is beyond the reach of the elegy. The lacunae of the archive are encapsulated in 'history half' – or as it could be construed, half of *his story*. From Howe's perspective, any notion of what could be described as the complete story – the fashioning of an apparently coherent whole where none is available – would amount to an unethical assimilation of the other by the self. In his exploration of the concept of archiving, Derrida remarks that '[t]he secret is the very ash of the archive' (1996: 100), arguing at once that documents authored by, and relating to, the dead are integral to the potential revelations of the archive and at the same time impossible to decipher or to fashion into a comprehensible narrative.[8] The elegist might be enticed into approaching the dead – who are made all the more alluring by their ultimate elusiveness – by the notion that what they conceal, and what conceals them, is a solvable 'secret'.

In a discussion of her work, Howe reflects on her poetic practice and suggests what might be done for the dead when she remarks that 'the only way for me to reach them […] is through the limited perspective of documents' (Thompson 2005). Howe indicates that archived 'documents' represent a retrievable trace of the dead that might be incorporated in the elegy. But this trace is itself subject to severe limitations – the words of the absent other are only a fractional element of what constitutes the whole person. In 'Souls of the Labadie Tract', Howe shows that the 'limited perspective' is one that is shared by archived documents and the archival space that they occupy:

I keep you here to keep
your promise all that you
think I've wrought what

I see or do in the twilight
of time but keep forgetting
you keep coming back

(2007: 55)

The opening words of Howe's poem, 'I keep you here', situate the archive as a place of

[8] Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* was, according to the Translator's Note, first delivered as a '[l]ecture given on 5 June 1994 in London during an international colloquium entitled "Memory: The Question of Archives"'. The lecture was originally titled 'The Concept of the Archive: A Freudian Impression' (1996: vii).

incarceration, where documents are kept 'in the twilight | of time'. But this apparent indistinctness is not limited to the archival space – the ambiguity attached to the 'I' and the 'you' represents a challenge to the authority and control of the first-person pronoun: who exactly is being kept here, given the allure that the archive holds for the poet? The echo of the word 'keep', repeated on four separate occasions in Howe's poem, and culminating in the phrase, 'you keep coming back', implies the repeated return of the elegist to the site of retrieval. The dead cannot be fully seen or comprehended, but they continue to reappear, suggesting the archive as a kind of unconscious where that which is repressed rises sporadically to the surface.

Further, the uncertainty of origin of documents that have aged and deteriorated is suggested by the phrase, 'all that you | think I've wrought', representing a warning from the dead to the poet – and an implicit challenge to the poet's authority – that the territory of the archive will fail to deliver what is desired, regardless of the 'promise' of items that Howe thinks she has discovered. The poet may enter the territory of the absent other with an idea that she might be able to encompass 'all' of the other on the page, but this will prove to be an illusion. That is, 'all that you | think I've wrought' will always fall short of what the dead know themselves that they have fashioned; what constitutes the other can never be brought wholly into the realm of the self.

Howe performs a partial recovery of the dead by retrieving fragments from the archive and transplanting them into her own poetic space. But there is an inherent risk of simply transferring the archived from one confined space into another, thus inflicting a different version of the archive's restrictions and categorisations within the boundaries of the page. Derrida observes that 'the meaning of "archive" […] comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address', adding that it is 'in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place' (1996: 2). The subjective impositions of the elegist – rather like the subjective narratives imposed on the archive – risk transforming the other into a version of the self. But Howe appears sensitive to the idea that the contents of the archive can be loosed, so that the value of others can be made more visible without necessarily foregrounding the self. For instance, in a letter that Howe sent to George F. Butterick to thank him for his work on the Charles Olson archives, Howe writes that she 'can't imagine Olson ever having found a more sensitive editor', adding that '[s]o many people would have done it all wrong, […] many of them

with their own horns to blow' (Collis 2006: 83).[9] In an interview with Edward Foster, Howe remarks that one of Butterick's great strengths as an editor was his ability to allow the 'silences' of Olson's work to speak, so that the otherness of Olson's voice remains untainted by the voice of the self.[10] In facilitating 'the presence of absence' in Olson's work (Howe 1993a: 180), Butterick resists the temptation to insert himself in the spaces, and impose his own voice on the voice of the dead.

Between 1975 and 1988, Howe engaged in long correspondence with Butterick, who opened up Olson's archive for Howe and 'was Howe's way into Olson – her means of entering into conversation with the older poet' (Collis 2006: 80), thus establishing an important point of connection: 'Olson, through Butterick, reaches out from the archive to Howe' (2006: 76). As Collis adds, 'Butterick played bridge builder' (2006: 115), acting as a mediator between the living and the dead, a role to which Howe applies her own particular practice. In a letter to Butterick of 5 October 1980, Howe writes that '[i]t seems in my work as if I am going from room to room, opening door after door' (Collis 2006: 84), a theme which she develops in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*:

In the house the house is all
house and each of its authors
passing from room to room

Short eclogues as one might
say on tiptoe do not infringe

(2007: 77)[11]

The 'authors' of 'the house' are those who, in being included in the archive, make up the contents of the archive, and so in Derrida's terms, construct the house – within

[9] Howe's letter to Butterick, dated 9 February 1977, thanks him for producing *The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives*, which Butterick edited; ten issues of the journal appeared between 1974 and 1978. Butterick's works on Olson include *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (University of California Press: 1978), and, as editor with Richard Blevins, *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, 10 vols, (Black Sparrow Books: 1980-1996). Butterick (1942-1988) also wrote the foreword to Paul Christensen's *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (University of Texas Press: 1979).

[10] Howe's interview with Edward Foster, conducted in July 1989, was originally published as 'An Interview with Susan Howe', in the Spring 1990 edition of *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, 4, pp. 14-38. It was subsequently published as 'Talisman Interview, with Edward Foster', in Howe's *The Birth-mark* (1993), pp. 155-81.

[11] '118 Westerly Terrace', in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, pp. 75-109.

which they are then placed under 'house arrest'. But the fact that the dead are 'passing from room to room' means that they have achieved a measure of liberty within the confines of the house; although Howe's page is a fixed, static space, it is fashioned into a repository for texts that display a fluidity of movement, in the sense that they are incoherent and fragmented. Howe also foregrounds her own 'itinerancy', as she moves 'from one passage or reference to another, one author's voice through another's' (Collis 2006: 129), suggesting the potential for the elegist to exercise a certain freedom within the confined space of the page. Howe passes 'from room to room' in search of those who are archived, and the words of the other pass from the archive into Howe's 'short eclogues', which 'do not infringe', but accommodate the dead in their overtakelessness. Echoing Emily Dickinson's '"Not at Home"' inscription 'upon the flesh', Howe's 'house' notes the transition of the dead from a material archive – in the sense of its physical structure and the documents it contains – into a space that foregrounds what cannot be assimilated, that which in Dickinson's words is 'beyond the hope of touch' (1970: 690).

Howe demonstrates by means of her textual collages, which use the original words of absent others, that the elegist may facilitate a form of agency for the dead by allowing them to speak. It is in this way that Howe endeavours to address the question of the elegist's ethical responsibility by paying attention to what constitutes the otherness of the other. That is to say, she poses a crucial question for the elegist: what is it about the elegised other that conveys an idea of their separateness from the poetic self, and how can this distinction be shown in the elegy? In his discussion of the particular problem of how to respond to a large loss of life, such as occurred in America on 11 September 2001, William Watkin points to the inefficacy of language:

> Language is, in fact, woefully inadequate when it comes to naming lost objects because language summarises while the object of being is singular. Singularity is not the same as personality or individuality; it can instead be defined primarily as a guarantee that a subject is always more than the words used about them.
>
> (2004: 228)

Watkin observes that in the circumstances of mass mourning, terms such as 'the dead' fail to address important questions of identity and individuality (2004: 228). But there is a wider point to be made about the inadequacy of language: that it will always represent rather than recreate the dead in their fullness, and that, in any case, the words of an elegy can only ever describe a fragment of what constitutes the other. The singular other

remains in a place that is beyond language – there will always be the untranslated portion, the surplus that is beyond reach. If an elegised 'subject is always more than the words used about them', then the elegist must accept that language will fail to encompass the dead. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in the following section, Howe's negotiation with the overtakelessness of the dead through her textual collages suggests that the material incorporation of words once used *by the dead*, rather than *about them*, might allow the elegist to get closer to a notion of the singularity of the other and to foreground the overtakelessness that puts them out of reach.

'Archival Strata': Textual Collages

Howe's retrieval of textual material from the obscurity of the archive, and its subsequent incorporation in the space of the page, suggests that the elegy can potentially perform an ethical act of recovery – fragments of the body (of work) of the elegised are brought out of concealment and into the light – that is also an act of protection, as the elegist's body (the body of the poem, and of the poet's work) effectively becomes a repository for the remains of the dead. But whereas Orpheus attempts to recover Eurydice to a fullness of presence, Howe's retrieval and subsequent translation of fragments into her textual collages represents a foregrounding of the incompleteness and incomprehensibility of the dead. That is to say, her retrieval of a trace of the dead, rather than a version of a whole, also serves to remind the reader of what remains out of reach.

In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Gillian Rose discusses her recent discovery of a Nicolas Poussin painting, *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*,[12] which depicts the gathering of Phocion's ashes by his wife following the burning of his body outside the city.[13] In the process of her investigations into Poussin's work, Rose comes across Wendy Beckett's BBC TV analysis of Poussin's painting, in which Beckett remarks of Phocion's wife that she 'came secretly, scooped up the ashes, […] put them in a bowl, put in water and

[12] Poussin's 1648 oil painting is held at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/collections/highlights/item.aspx?tab=summary&item=wag+10350&hl=1&coll=14> [accessed 21 August 2014].

[13] Rose relates the background to the cremation of Phocion, the Athenian statesman: 'Phocion was eventually accused of treason by his enemies, and was sentenced to die, like Socrates, by taking hemlock. As an additional disgrace, Phocion's burial within Athens was forbidden, and no Athenian was to provide fire for his funeral. His body was taken outside the city walls and burnt by a paid alien; his ashes were left untended on the pyre' (1996: 23). I return to *Mourning Becomes the Law* in Chapter 5.

swallowed them, so that he *would* have a tomb; she would be his tomb, his living tomb' (Beckett 1992: 2:39-2:53).[14] Rose admits regarding Beckett's commentary that 'I can't persuade her to reveal the source for this', but she recognises the potency of her interpretation; Rose notes 'the complete vulnerability' of Phocion's wife, bent over her husband's remains, 'as she devotes her whole body to retrieving the ashes' (1996: 25).

In this respect, Howe's retrieval and incorporation of material remnants of the dead into the body of her page, and in a broader sense into the body of her work, shows that the elegist might fashion a structure that both carries the elegised – Beckett writes that the mourner becomes a 'living tomb' – and guards the other against the deleterious effects of further loss and concealment. R. Clifton Spargo considers the central significance of loss in a 'poetic ethics of mourning', and specifically:

> whether we are to interpret that loss as having signified responsibility, not only by identifying the other's finally unalterable alterity but by placing us upon the threshold moment of responsibility's conception, when another who was vulnerable and about to die called for our protection even though he or she had not yet asked for it directly.
>
> (2004: 6)

Howe foregrounds the 'unalterable alterity' of the others she retrieves by giving prominence to their own words rather than her own, in textual structures that themselves refute straightforward categorisation. She is poised on her own 'threshold moment of responsibility's conception' when she enters the archive and confronts those who, rather than being 'about to die', are *already dead*, and 'vulnerable' to a further – and potentially deeper – loss to memory. By means of her poetic practice and the word-collages that arise, Howe also suggests that the elegist has a responsibility to protect the overtakelessness of the dead by demonstrating that the fullness of the other cannot be encompassed within the space of the page. Consider, for instance, a piece from Howe's 'Frolic Architecture' (Figure 3, p. 53), in which she retrieves Hannah Edwards's words from the archive: 'I remember the summer before my sister Jerusha's death, […] and I was leaning over the south fence and thinking in this manner, that I was never likely to do better and where should I go etc.' (2010: 70).

[14] Wendy Beckett, also known as Sister Wendy, presented a series of documentaries in the 1990s for the BBC on the history of art. The opening programme in the first series, *Sister Wendy's Odyssey* (1992), focuses on Liverpool and includes her analysis of the Poussin painting.

I remember the summer before my sister Jerusha's death,

making

and I was leaning over the south fence and thinking in this manner, that I was never likely to do better and where should I go etc.

70

Figure 3: 'Frolic Architecture', in *That This*, p. 70

In Figure 3, the word 'making' is partially visible on the left side of Howe's collage, and the semi-occluded phrase, 'marked by the distortion' appears as an inverted, compressed layer in a scattering of miscellaneous letters and fractured words of uncertain origin. The depiction of what appears to be a seam of language, sandwiched above and below by fragmented lexical deposits, coincides with Derrida's observation of what he calls 'archival strata' (1996: 22). In its most immediate sense, material in the archive is successively covered over by new additions to the archival space; and older material, together with its authors, is concealed by the weight of fading memory – suggested by the incoherent scattering of letters that presses down on the phrase, 'marked by the distortion'. For Howe, who approaches the dead long after their demise, the initial burial of corporeal remains is followed by archival entombment; the poet's visualisation of lexical layers means that the reader is made aware that, as Derrida puts it, '[t]o read, in this case, requires working at geological or archaeological excavations, on substrates or under surfaces, old or new skins' (1996: 22).

The process of 'working at […] excavations' incorporates the sense of an extraction of archival material, as well as demonstrating that part of the process of extraction and re-presentation for Howe, and ultimately for Howe's reader, is a task of working at meaning and context – made more difficult by the inversion and erasure of words and fragments of individual letters. Howe makes available for the reader a perception of the complexity of the elegist's task in retrieving the elegised other and then of incorporating the other in the space of her work. Given that there will always be a part of the dead that remains uncaptured and unarticulated, how does the elegist decide which fragments to retrieve? The very nature of a fragment – decontextualised and incoherent – means that the elegist remains at risk of an inadequate representation of the elegised. In these circumstances, how can the reader begin to work at developing a conception of what constitutes the elegised other?

Howe's extraction of fragments of Hannah Edwards's writing demonstrates the potentially contentious nature of work that is carried out at the site of an archive – the question both of what material is retrieved and how it is subsequently handled. In her texts *The Birth-mark* (1993) and *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Howe discusses the historical treatment by successive editors of Emily Dickinson's original handwritten manuscripts, which have been subject to significant editorial intervention, and remained largely

unpublished in their original format.[15] Howe notes that what is left behind in Dickinson's archive is what the poet 'reveals of her most profound self in the multiple multilayered scripts, sets, notes, and scraps' (1993a: 20), and adds: 'Why isn't there a[n] […] editorial project working now to show the layerings and fragile immediacies of her multifaceted visual and verbal productions?' (1993a: 19). Twenty years after Howe's question in *The Birth-mark* about the reproduction of Dickinson's original manuscripts, Marta Werner's work at the site of Dickinson's fragments and drafts from the archive culminated in the first full-colour facsimile publication of Dickinson's manuscripts – reproductions of fifty-two actual-size handwritten envelope fragments, with accompanying transcriptions. In the Preface to this volume, *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*, Howe writes: 'For almost twenty years few poets and fewer scholars, after seeing the originals, have dared to show us the ways in which what we thought we saw was not really what was there' (Werner and Bervin 2013: 6).

The distinction between what is seen and not seen by the reader – or as Howe suggests, the potential discrepancy between what is 'really […] there' in the archive, and what ultimately emerges on the published page – serves as a reminder that archival work, like the work of elegy, can never be entirely objective. Howe's intent to preserve the otherness of the other is subject at the very least to a question of which material from the archive she selects for inclusion in her word-collages, and in what precise way she chooses to configure the textual fragments of the dead. Howe remarks that '[i]n a Dickinson poem or letter there is always something other' (1993a: 153), suggesting that successive volumes of Dickinson's works have eliminated the quality of otherness in the other, in preference for the subjective marks of the self; what might appear to be the authentic expression of Dickinson has in fact been subjected to the alterations and interventions of respective editors of her work. As Jen Bervin observes: 'Even in the most trusted scholarly editions, editors have restructured Dickinson's poems for print in

[15] Thomas H. Johnson's three-volume edition, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard University Press: 1955) was compressed into one volume for *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Little, Brown: 1962). Ralph Franklin's two-volume facsimile edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard University Press: 1981) was, claims Howe, '[t]he crucial advance for Dickinson textual scholarship' (1993a: 153), but of Franklin's three-volume *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition* (Harvard University Press: 1998), Howe writes that it 'continued to ignore the visual and acoustic aspects of the manuscripts that are particularly obvious in the late fragments and drafts' (Werner and Bervin 2013: 6). Dickinson's original poems, manuscripts, and letters, along with rough drafts and fragments of her poems, are available online at Amherst College Digital Collections, <https://acdc.amherst.edu/collection/ed> [accessed 11 April 2014].

opposition to the manuscripts, consistently overriding her line breaks, systematically deconstructing […] her formal construction of variant words and punctuation' (2013: 11).[16] However, it is important to note that even Dickinson's original envelope-manuscripts in *The Gorgeous Nothings* do not bring Dickinson to light in the fullness of her presence, but, as *traces* of the dead, they are as authentic as the fragments of Hannah Edwards in Figure 3, above. Such fragments do not preclude a recognition by Howe that what she is presenting of the dead as fragments are precisely that – *fragments* – and not the whole. Hannah Edwards's words in Figure 3 are simultaneously visible and invisible, coherent and incoherent; they show 'something other', but not the plenitude of the other.

In Figure 3, the words 'I remember' in the first line of the textual collage are partially erased from below, as if they are struggling to emerge fully from what Derrida refers to as archival strata. The secondary burial of the dead in the archive recalls the various layers through which Hannah Edwards's voice must penetrate before it reaches the contemporary reader: she is enclosed within the Jonathan Edwards archive, and her writing is transcribed by her daughter. Hannah Edwards's voice, via her daughter, then endures another transcription by Howe, before being cut and pasted into the poet's imagined textual structure. The 'I' of 'I remember' is subjected to semi-obscurity as a reflection of the distance that Howe's collage has travelled from Hannah Edwards's original voice. The pertinence of a silted 'I', and therefore by implication an occluded 'you', also resides in a question of fading memory – for both Hannah Edwards, who looks back to 'the summer before my sister Jerusha's death', and Howe, the contemporary retriever of Edwards's fragments. What constitutes Howe's relationship with Hannah Edwards, given that Edwards was personally unknown to Howe during her lifetime, and the poet has only encountered her subject through her buried inscriptions?

The elegist who is armed with personal knowledge of the other might at least have recourse to fragments of the elegised other that are of personal significance to the

[16] 'Studies in Scale: An Introduction by Jen Bervin', in *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*, pp. 8-14. Bervin acknowledges the challenges presented by a depiction of Dickinson's manuscripts in book form: 'Dickinson's manipulation of textual space is elastic in the manuscripts: her sprawling headlong letterforms, ambiguous capitalization, gestural punctuation, scale shifts in variant words, extremely short lines, and expansive spatial placement of words on the page trouble even a visually minded transcription' (2013: 11-12).

relationship of the 'I' and the 'you'. Even so, regardless of the relationship that was experienced during the lifetime of the other, the elegy remains an imagined retrieval of an imagined other; for Howe, her encounter with the overtakelessness of the dead might be described as an imagined retrieval of *unimaginable* others – buried in the passage of time, and devoid of personal connection. The words, 'marked by the distortion' – partially visible in a scattering of letters and mangled words – point towards the literal marks of distortion that Howe depicts on the page, while also alluding to the detrimental effects of time and disintegrating memory that are set in motion by the event of death. The immobile page, fixed in its own temporal space in the scene of elegy, struggles to accommodate the shifting identity of those who fall within its confines.

The distortions of memory are made visible by the elegist's words, which even as they attempt to shape recollections – and reshape the elegised in a freshly conceived space – make a tacit admission of their inadequacy and unreliability. In Figure 3, the phrase 'my sister Jerusha's death' is immediately followed by a disintegration of language, showing the intractable problem of talking about – and engaging in dialogue with – the dead in a language that cannot accommodate the new terms of non-existence, where the other is not only lost to immediate corporeal reality, but also made indistinct by the effects of time. Howe's chaotic collection of miscellaneous letters implies that the event of death throws even conventional grammatical constructions into doubt. In recollections of her reaction to the death of her son, Denise Riley observes 'the stumbling language about the being of the dead', and adds:

> The very grammar of discussing a death falters in its conviction in the same breath that the focus of talk, the formerly living person, himself disintegrates. Even the plainest 'he died' is a strange sentence, since there's no longer a human subject to sustain that 'he'.
>
> (2012b: 54)[17]

In the shattering of language at the centre of her collage of Hannah Edwards's words, Howe gestures towards the emotional implosion precipitated by death and the fact that grammar is unable to reshape 'the formerly living' other precisely because the other that

[17] *Time Lived, Without its Flow* deals with the death of Riley's son Jacob, and specifically '[t]he experience […] of living in suddenly arrested time: that acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow that can grip you after the sudden death of your child' (2012b: 7). The essay serves as a companion piece to Riley's elegy 'A Part Song', to which I refer in Chapter 2.

gave meaning to 'he' is no longer alive. Elegy foregrounds an irresolvable tension between the demands of the present and the demands of the past – a tension that resides in the very structure and value of the poem's means of expression. Riley adds: 'It's as if any death causes the collapse of the simplest referring language. As if the grammatical subject of the sentence and the human subject have been felled together by the one blow' (2012b: 55). If grammar – the whole system and structure for understanding language – disintegrates, then an important framework for figuring and understanding relation to the elegised other also collapses. The destruction of the other is followed by the destruction of a potential means for the elegist of re-establishing the presence of the dead within the space of the elegy. In this way, grammar – or the lack of a suitable grammar, reconfigured to accommodate the repercussions of death – appears to confirm the overtakelessness of the dead.

Howe suggests in Figure 3, by means of the arrangement of the different lexical components of her collage, that, following the announcement of the word 'death', language is suddenly thrown into chaos, its flow fatally interrupted; subsequently, time is also interrupted because according to Riley, the 'trajectory' of language 'is always to lean forward into life, to push it along' (2012b: 56). When this trajectory is halted, then time too is 'distorted', or to use Riley's word, 'arrested', giving to her 'that acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow that can grip you' (2012b: 7). Howe's visualisation of Hannah Edwards's reaction to her sister's death takes the form of a shattering that encompasses both language and time – where the contemporary poet encounters the death of an unknown who falls outside her personal experience and her frames of reference. Riley remarks that following a death:

> Your old stance is changed […] by the shattering of that underlying intuition of moving in time, which you can't register until it's collapsed. If time was once flowing, extended, elongated – a river, a road, a ribbon – now the river is dammed, the road blocked, the ribbon slashed.
>
> (2012b: 36)

The narrative and temporal flow – metaphorised here by Riley as 'a river, a road, a ribbon' – that Howe sets in motion in Hannah Edwards's unspooling memory from her diary, 'I remember the summer before my sister Jerusha's death,' is 'dammed' by a spectacular lexical collapse. This collapse hampers both the collage's retrieval of the dead and a depiction of that obstructed retrieval in coherent language, so that the

discernible phrase 'marked by […] distortion' is both reversed and inverted – its full emergence into the light of recollection is 'blocked' by the layerings of time and accumulated archival material.

In Figure 3, the cluster of shattered words that emanated from Hannah Edwards via her daughter before their convoluted journey into Howe's contemporary space indicate that processes of disintegration – of the corporeal body, and subsequently of the absent other in the consciousness of the living – result in an unassimilable entity. Hannah Edwards's fragments defeat sense-making, but they are also unrecognisable from the form in which they previously existed, implying that the alterity of the other escapes definition and description even as otherness demands that it be given shape on the page. Further to Figure 3, in another collage from 'Frolic Architecture', Howe foregrounds the tension between absence and presence (Figure 4, p. 60).

The original source of Hannah Edwards's words, 'our lives are all exceeding brittle', is cited by Howe in 'The Disappearance Approach':

> GEN MSS 151, Box 24, Folder 1379. Hannah Edwards, Diary Fragment / ca. 1739
>
> "My Dear Children,
> What shall I leave to you or what shall I say to you. Fain would I do something while I live that may contribute to your real benefit and advantage—our lives are all exceeding brittle and uncertain…"
>
> (2010: 29-30)

In Figure 4, the first line of text is erased almost to the point of non-existence – the strangeness of what remains recalls the smallest fragments of language in Figure 3. The parts of Hannah Edwards's cited diary fragment, above, that are subsequently visible in Figure 4 are 'or what shall I say to you', and 'our lives are all exceeding brittle' (2010: 63), suggesting that the other – figured by means of language – emerges as slivers of coherence at the very point where it is asserting its own fragility. The brittleness of the other can be located in an unavoidable presence that is vulnerable to imminent disappearance; the final letter in Hannah Edwards's assertion that 'I was so separate' is itself partly obscured by the white space of the page.

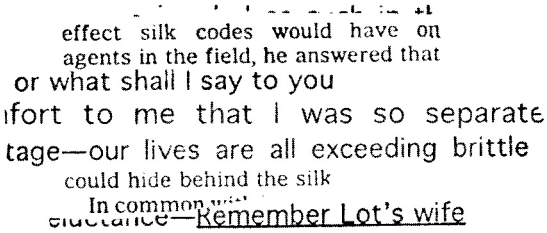

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Figure 4: 'Frolic Architecture', in *That This*, p. 63

Hannah Edwards's words in Figure 4 are sandwiched between fragments of a review from *The New York Times* of a book by Leo Marks relating his wartime exploits as a codemaker.[18] According to the book review, written by Mel Gussow, Marks created a code system based on poetry, much of which Marks wrote himself. The codes were transferred to a piece of silk, which could then be concealed under clothing 'and would be undetectable in any initial body search' (Gussow 1999). There then follows the section of Gussow's review from which Howe extracts the fragments of text for her collage:

> When Mr Marks was asked what *effect silk codes would have on agents in the field, he answered that* it was the difference "between silk and cyanide." The assumption was that if an agent was caught, he would not have to swallow a suicide pill but *could hide behind the silk. […] In common with* Mr Marks's other innovations, it was not easy to convince officials of the efficacy of his project.
>
> (my emphases)
>
> (Gussow 1999)

Marks's code system based on poetry resonates with Howe's own poetic practice, which thrives on the tension between concealment and revelation, as enacted by the retrieval of absent others. The first line in Figure 4 is indecipherable, echoing a specific feature of Figure 3, where a disembodied mark at the top-left of Howe's collage is situated on the margin of lexical activity – that is to say, the margin as it is defined by the words 'making', 'manner' and 'go'. In Figure 3, Howe positions a trace of a lexical mark outside of Riley's 'temporal flow', in the sense that it is unrecognisable as a component of language, and it is the only mark that is located outside of the frame of temporality that is defined by the boundaries of Howe's collage. The unassimilable mark in Figure 3 hovers close to, but outside of, the principal structure of the collage, suggesting the possibility of incorporating a trace of the other within the body of the page, while simultaneously preserving a measure of the other's alterity. The elegised is brought into the light of presence, but in a manner that foregrounds the absence of the other.

Taken as bodily fragments of lost others, Howe's unassimilable marks in Figure 3 and Figure 4 enact an encounter with the dead that explores the limitations of such a meeting. From an ethical perspective, following the event of death, the other demands that otherness be *incorporated in* but not *encompassed by* the elegy. Derrida remarks in an

[18] *Between Silk and Cyanide: A Codemaker's War, 1941-1945* (Harper Collins: 1998).

essay in memory of Louis Marin that death has both 'given him over', in the sense that he is now wholly 'in us' as opposed to existing in corporeal reality, and at the same time 'distanced him' from the self because he remains, as he was in life, 'completely other, infinitely other' (2001: 161).[19] He is, adds Derrida, '[f]ar away in us' (2001: 161), rather in the same way that Howe's lexical traces of the dead are both 'in' the body of her page, but 'away' from the main body of her collage, suspended in an unclassifiable territory of white space, and therefore 'infinitely other'.

Elsewhere, Derrida expands on this particular aspect of otherness as part of a discussion of Levinas's work:

> The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized.
>
> (1981: 118)

Howe aims to demonstrate that the dead escape comprehension by means of her location of particular textual fragments outside the physical and cognitive framework of her textual collages. In this way, she suggests that the dead 'cannot be bound' by language, but that she might show the ways in which language – and by extension, the elegy – fails to encompass its subject, because its subject inhabits a space that exists outside the 'horizon' of the living. If a true perception of the other as other is based on 'some failure in the process of assimilation' (Attridge 2004: 33), in what way does Howe aim to demonstrate this 'failure' while at the same time meeting the demand that the others she retrieves are not only seen, but *heard* in such a way that accommodates and communicates otherness?

'Sounds in Silence': Acoustic Otherness

Howe's emotional and temporal distance from the dead – exacerbated, in the examples shown above, by the distance that Hannah Edwards's words are made to travel through

[19] Louis Marin (1931-1992), French philosopher and art historian. He was director of studies at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris from 1977 to 1992. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas note that Derrida's essay 'By Force of Mourning' in *The Work of Mourning* 'is the transcription of a talk given January 28, 1993, at the Pompidou Center in Paris during a conference honoring Louis Marin' (2001: 142).

successive transcriptions and Howe's own photocopying of material – puts her at risk of losing a measure of the quality of otherness that characterises the other. Howe remarks that 'manuscripts can only lead to the limit of a voice' (2011), suggesting the dual nature of 'voice' in this context as not merely the author's distinctive tone and style – in Hannah Edwards's case, filtered through and potentially altered by the transcriptions of her daughter – but also the particular acoustic quality of the voice of the other, subsumed into and neutralised by the written word. If, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, 'the demand of the other […] is a call' (Attridge 2004: 131), then one might say that an ethical imperative of the elegy is to attend to the other as an acoustic entity rather than solely as a textual entity. But given that Howe's archival encounters with the dead are restricted to precisely the muted 'manuscripts' to which she refers above, how might she fashion a voice for those others? And in what ways can language – or the fragmentations thereof – begin to approximate the sounds of her subjects? In her interview with Edward Foster, Howe reflects on her poetic practice:

> I think the poet opens herself […]. You open yourself and let language enter, let it lead you somewhere. I sit quietly at my desk and let various things – memories, fragments, bits, pieces, scraps, sounds – let them all work into something. […] It has to do with sounds in silence.
>
> (Howe 1993a: 164)

There is a parallel here between Howe's observation that she 'opens herself' and Wendy Beckett's reading of Poussin's painting, discussed earlier, wherein she relates that Phocion's wife swallows his ashes in order to provide her husband with a 'living tomb'. Howe's treatment of fragments of language, which represent in one sense for her the remains of the dead, demonstrates an incorporation that does not preclude the autonomy of the other, so that what constitutes the dead – emotional and physical fragments – is given the space to 'work into something' after being worked *out of* the archive. For Howe, the conjuring of sound from the 'silence' of the printed word – previously enclosed in the soundless archive – is a means of giving a voice to the silent dead that serves to emphasise, rather than detract from, their otherness. Consider, for example, a piece from *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (Figure 5, p. 64).[20]

[20] 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards', in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, pp. 111-25. In an interview, Howe remarks that this section of the book 'had been a way to translate into print my reaction to the thrill of seeing the collection of Jonathan Edwards's manuscripts at Yale's Beinecke Library' (2011).

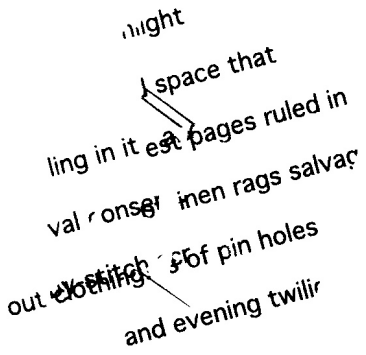

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Figure 5: 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards', in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, p. 121

In Figure 5, severed words appear to have either lost opening syllables – 'ling' and 'val' in lines 3 and 4 – or fail to resolve themselves into sense: the truncated 'salvag' in line 4, and what appears to be 'twili' in the final line. As incomplete entities, these truncations are each immediately suggestive of the portion of a fragmented body that has been left behind. Each word also issues an unfamiliar sound that, particularly in the case of 'salvag' and 'twili', struggles for articulation. What appear to be the words 'clothing' and 'stitch' have become entangled, made alien by overprinting that recalls the effects of material layering in the archive, conveying the idea of thick, guttural expression. Unusual, nonsemantic marks appear in between lines of text: one of these marks, between lines 2 and 3, fashions a physical and acoustic connection between the words 'space' and 'pages'. Another mark, between lines 5 and 6, performs a similar function – the word 'stitch', intertwining itself with 'clothing', indicates an aural link between 'clot*hing*' and 'eve*ning*' (my emphases). The concept of stitching acquires further relevance when Howe relates her visit to the Jonathan Edwards Collection at the Beinecke:

> I […] looked carefully at three of the manuscript books he titled "Efficacious Grace." Two of them were constructed from discarded semi-circular pieces of silk paper Edwards's wife and daughters used for making fans. If you open these small volumes and just *look* – without trying to decipher the minister's spidery hand – penstrokes begin to resemble stitches of thread as if the text moving across its fragile textile surface contains message within message.
>
> (Howe 2011)

Howe gestures towards an act of looking rather than reading or sense-making, but she also suggests the act of hearing in the description of her discovery at the Beinecke – the swish of the silk-paper fans and the movement of the thread-like penstrokes as they make their way across the 'fragile textile surface'. In Figure 5, one is made more aware of the physical shape of Howe's collage – a cluster of lexical sounds suspended in the silence of the page – than any coherent narrative or syntax that might act to assimilate the fragmented voice of the other into the voice of the poet. In an online essay, musician and composer David Grubbs discusses his musical collaborations with Howe and recalls a comment by the poet during a talk at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she reflects on the relationship between sound and language:

> [Joseph] Beuys said one of the most wonderful things in one of his lectures, that I always say now when I'm trying to persuade people about manuscripts. He said

> that "every mark on paper is an acoustic signal." That is something I truly believe. Every piece of a letter, every shape of a letter, every word, how words are placed on the page, the minute you put a mark on a page, it's acoustic.
>
> (2010)[21]

Grubbs admits his uncertainty about the precise meaning of what he calls Howe's 'curious formulation: "Every mark on paper is an acoustic signal"', but it perhaps indicates that the aural value of Howe's poetry often overrides a syntactical approach that might try to derive grammatical coherence from the type of textual collage depicted in Figure 5. Instead, the reader is invited to attend to the appearance and sound of individual words and marks, rather than reaching for a long-held attachment to meaning and logic. In this way, the otherness of the words themselves – and therefore, potentially, the otherness of the other – is foregrounded when words are deprived of letters or severed in mid-flow.

Howe perhaps considers that an enhanced appreciation of the alterity of language when it is deprived of its conventional contexts, and when its familiar sounds are altered, might enable the reader to make a more nuanced connection with the otherness of the other – and in this way respond to the crisis of the other's value – as well as the inarticulate sounds that issue from the other. Peter Nicholls remarks that 'Howe's mode of composition […] is very visually conditioned, producing constellations of words which combine in a way that forces prosody *against* syntax. […] Howe attends to sound and to individual words, recombining these in an order that defies syntactical logic' (1996: 596). Howe's obligation to the other incorporates a tacit acknowledgement on the part of the poet that she must resist the impulse to make sense where no logical sense can be perceived. Furthermore, Howe appears to reveal that acoustic principles are a significant factor in her poetic practice when she remarks in an interview that she becomes 'so involved with the sound in my head of the words I am looking at on the page that the aural alchemy between them is the overarching force' (Thompson 2005).

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[21] Grubbs has collaborated with Howe on a number of productions, including: *Thiefth* (Blue Chopsticks BC15) (2005); *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, recorded live at the Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London on 8 October 2009; and *Frolic Architecture*, at Harvard University, 1 November 2011, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe-Grubbs.php> [accessed 8 November 2013].
On 25 October 2013, The Issue Project Room in Brooklyn, New York, presented a Howe/Grubbs collaboration *WOODSLIPPERCOUNTERCLATTER*, described as 'a sound-work that germinates from new, unpublished Susan Howe text collages', <http://issueprojectroom.org/drupal/event/david-grubbs-susan-howe> [accessed 18 November 2013].

In Figure 5, Howe's alchemical transmutation of the words 'clothing' and 'stitch', fashioned by the overprinting and distortion of typefaces, creates a fresh typographical entity that defies coherence and description. Howe creates a face – in the sense of an amalgamated type*face* and a point from which the sound of the dead emanates – that falls outside the borders of logical categorisation and comprehension. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Blanchot suggests that Eurydice can be figured as an embodiment of overtakelessness when he observes that 'she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend', but that 'Orpheus is capable of everything, except of looking this point in the face, except of looking at the center of the night in the night' (1982: 171). Therefore, the face of Eurydice, from which Orpheus must avert his gaze, comes to represent that which cannot be encompassed by the poem.

Howe's distorted type*face* in Figure 5 is a visual and aural conception of overtakelessness that incorporates the poet's recognition of what lies beyond her gaze. For Levinas, the face acquires central significance in ethical relations between the self and the other because it is through exposure to the face of the other that the alterity of the other is revealed to the self. The distinction between the self and the other, remarks Levinas, is indicated by the fact that '[t]he face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed' (1979: 194). Through her use of a typeface that has become visually and aurally incomprehensible, Howe suggests that language cannot encompass the face of the dead – or at least, not in any recognisable or coherent form. Judith Butler appears to approach a definition of Howe's ethical creation of an unassimilable voice for the dead when she writes that '[t]he face, if we are to put words to its meaning, will be that for which no words really work; the face seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense' (2004: 134). By means of her typographical disfigurement, whereby she removes the ability of words to 'work' within conventional parameters of understanding, Howe indicates that the removal of sense creates a space in the elegy that can be occupied by the dead. Butler adds:

> To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. […] It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics.
>
> (2004: 134)

Butler argues that the crisis of the other's value revolves around a question of the 'precariousness of the Other'. In Figure 5, sense is made precarious by highlighting the instability of language through odd juxtapositions, truncations, deletions and disintegration. In foregrounding 'the sound of language evacuating its sense', Howe suggests that 'an understanding' of the precariousness of the other is dependent on a failure of understanding; it is perhaps more likely that the otherness of the other will be protected if the reader encounters an unintelligible voice. When Howe remarks in her interview with Foster that she is interested in 'the stutter' because 'I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty' (1993a: 181), she indicates that the preservation of precarious speech, vulnerable to incoherence and collapse, represents an important negotiation with overtakelessness.

In the final couplet of a poem from '118 Westerly Terrace' in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, there is a misspelling in the second line: 'Workaholic state of revery | Destititute of benevolence' (2007: 85). Howe actualises the stutter – the sounding of uncertainty – by hampering any attempted pronunciation and by playing on the uncertainty of the reader: is this an accidental typographical error or a deliberate misspelling? Either way, Howe's word serves to foreground both sound and meaning, as the destitution of the other – deprived of a voice and presence by the event of death – acts as a spur to ethical behaviour on the part of the elegist. Levinas remarks that 'the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. […] My position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other' (1979: 215). Howe's response to the 'destitution of the Other' is not to silence this destitution, but to amplify its presence by making its impairment, 'destititute', integral to her poem. By this means, the dead are allowed to retain their precarious voice, what Howe terms 'the outsidedness – these sounds, these pieces of words' (1993a: 166). Howe foregrounds a fractured 'outsidedness' because it preserves an alterity – the refusal to be encompassed – in which an apparent weakness actually works in favour of the other. Nicholls remarks of Howe's work that '[t]he failure to speak fluently becomes a strength as it sets up a resistance to conceptuality and dialectic […]. Stammering keeps us on the verge of intelligibility' (1996: 597). The notion of a poet and a reader 'on the verge of intelligibility' moves towards a connection with the other, albeit tenuous and vulnerable, while indicating that the otherness of the other cannot be wholly assimilated by the self. The borders of comprehension are visualised in consecutive pages from *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (Figure 6, p. 69):

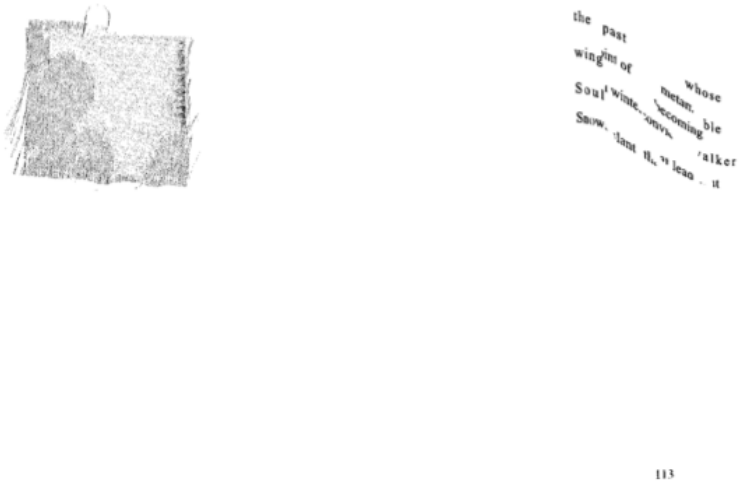

Figure 6: 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards',
in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, pp. 112-13

On the right-hand page in Figure 6 are fragments of words that in their configuration acquire some of the materiality of what they face – the retrieved scrap of Sarah Pierpont Edwards's wedding dress. The small square of fabric is an intensely personal fragment – what Howe calls a 'love relic' (2010: 32) – that makes its way into the archive of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and from there into the public space of Howe's work.[22] In this way, 'the past', visible at the top left of Howe's textual collage (2007: 113), is brought into a contemporary arena. Howe remarks that the fragment of material is distinguished by its muteness to the casual observer – that it 'says nothing at all to an outsider' (2010: 32) – but it nevertheless speaks silently of the body of Sarah Pierpont Edwards that it once enclosed. By means of this corporeal resonance, Howe also attempts to figure the materiality of the other in words that have been broken into 'pieces', as she remarks above, and that are distinguished by their imperfection and incoherence – a private language that is made public by the work of elegy. In Figure 6,

[22] In *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, the fragment is reproduced in monochrome. A colour image, 'Fragment of the wedding dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards', part of the Jonathan Edwards Collection, can be found on the website of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3521005> [accessed 8 January 2014]. Sarah Pierpont married Jonathan Edwards in 1727.

the stray threads of fabric that emerge from the edges of the square of material (2007: 112) are mirrored by the textual fragment 'alker' that protrudes from the lower right side of Howe's collage, representing evidence of what Jerome McGann calls Howe's 'almost mystical involvement with the materialities of writing' (1993: 104). The remnant of material is a thread that connects Howe to the unknown dead.

Howe's textual form allows traces of language to occupy a space somewhere between materiality and absence, and between sound and silence. In 'The Disappearance Approach', Howe wonders after her husband's death if the sound of his voice can assume a materiality that affords presence even if, by its very nature as a detached fragment of his corporeal being, it denotes absence: 'Can a trace become the thing it traces, secure as ever, real as ever—a chosen set of echo-fragments?'. Howe suggests, through the figuring of her husband as 'echo-fragments', that what comes back from her own version of Orpheus's Underworld is not her 'wished-for love' in his plenitude, but a new entity that nevertheless emanates from the original object: 'The sound of Peter's voice communicated something apart from the words he was saying' (2010: 29). Through the incorporation of words and 'something apart from […] words' – lexical fragments and unintelligible signs – Howe 'gestures toward some kind of intermediary or liminal language which might allow us to remember people and events from the past while fully reckoning with their absence' (Nicholls and Howe 2002: 447). What are the implications for this 'liminal language' and Howe's obligation towards 'people and events from the past', when the territory that she explores acquires a more personal resonance?

Howe's Personal Terrain

Howe's ethical impulse to preserve the otherness of the other, and to avoid the assimilation of the words of the other into the self, makes an implicit acknowledgement that the integrity of the elegy is placed in jeopardy by the presence of the self. The very definition of action *on behalf of* the dead implies that the absent and voiceless other's return to presence – in whatever form that assumes on the page – is contingent on the performance and preferences of the self. Any voice that the other acquires after death is to some extent filtered through the agency of the poet. In her study of seventeenth-century funerary elegy, Andrea Brady concludes with a general point about elegists

when she writes that they 'invite the dead into their own hidden recesses' (2006: 213). Brady's point again recalls the swallowing of Phocion's ashes by his wife and suggests that the process of incorporation – as demonstrated by Howe's textual collages – is an act of protection of the other that necessitates a mingling of the other with the self. When Howe's poetic practice of incorporation is thought in this light, Brady's remark proposes the idea that, even as Howe is aiming to establish the alterity of the other, this process does not preclude an incorporation of the self.

Howe's work foregrounds the notion that, in the scene of elegy, the elegist's motive to protect the other may be occluded by a more pressing demand to protect the interests of the self. When Howe attends to the overtakelessness of an *unknown* other, such as Hannah Edwards, there is a tension that develops when the words of the other are invited into the recesses of the elegy – a space that is ultimately fashioned by the self. But the scene of elegy is further problematised when Howe investigates her own personal terrain – that of her father and her ancestors, the *known* other, and her own place in her country's history following the arrival of colonising forces in seventeenth-century America. In effect, in these circumstances, there is a tension between the elegist's negotiation with the overtakelessness of the dead and the elegist's negotiation with the demands of the self. How does this tension play out in Howe's work, and what role does language perform in its exploration?

Howe's father, Mark De Wolfe Howe, who was born in Boston, went away to war in 1942, and died in 1967. For a significant period of Susan Howe's life, letters were the only form of communication with her father; this correspondence became a lexical thread that not only connected Howe with her father, but also served to stitch together Howe's personal history and her poetic practice. For Susan Howe, her father's particular arrangement of letters on each page – forerunners of his daughter's own textual work – represented a visual and verbal point of connection that also acted to emphasise the emotional and temporal distance between the absent other and the self. Howe reveals that personal letters that she received from her father were not the originals, but – like the words of Hannah Edwards – copies of copies of the originals:

> During World War II my father's letters were a sign he was safe. A miniature photographic negative of his handwritten message was reproduced by the army and a microfilm copy forwarded to us. In the top left-hand corner someone always

stamped PASSED BY EXAMINER.

(Howe 1990a: 13)[23]

The nuanced notion of safety in Howe's observation suggests that indications of her father's security – conveyed via his correspondence – during the war finds a contemporary parallel in Howe's work: that is to say, language retrieves a fragment of the absent other, but the 'he' that represents her father in his plenitude eludes the grasp of her language. In other words, despite his strong personal connection to the poet, her father might remain 'safe' from assimilation by the self because language – limited to a representation rather than a re-creation of the original object – inevitably maintains a distance between the self and the other.

The appearance of Mark De Wolfe Howe's 'letters' on the page may appear to show a form of reincarnation of the other, but they are further distanced from the original hand of the other by their transition through 'photographic negative' and then 'microfilm copy'. The diminishment of the 'handwritten message' from miniature to micro form shapes a parallel diminishment in the physical presence of the other – a process initiated by the event of death and developed by the subsequent reappearance of the dead in language – and a dwindling of the other in the memory of the self. These processes resonate with Howe's archival explorations and suggest the difficulties faced by the elegist in translating the elegised from unknowable absence to the printed page. The fact that her father's letters were 'always stamped PASSED BY EXAMINER' serves as a reminder that for Howe the controls and censorship of the archive are a metaphor for the elegy's encounter with a translated other rather than the original object.

For Howe, the pursuit of her living father during his absence in the war is an immediate tracing – of letters inscribed in letters, since they 'were a sign he was safe' – that becomes, following his death, a more comprehensive and retrospective tracing of his origins. In this way, the demands of the other are mingled with the demands of the self – through a process of investigation of her father's history, Howe is also potentially in search of her own roots, which might represent a route to self-knowledge, or as Stephen Collis puts it in his discussion of Howe's work, '[t]he origin attracts as ultimate explanation (how *did* we get here?)' (2006: 68). The 'origin' for Howe is represented by

[23] 'There are not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover', in *The Europe of Trusts*, pp. 9-14.

the figure of her father, a man who also goes some way to explaining how the poet got 'here' to the archive, in a search for the origins of lost unknowns. When Howe admits that 'I wonder if my interest in manuscripts and the politics of the archive isn't simply a search for a precursive relation always beyond us, no more than that' (Thompson 2005), she suggests that the elegy's search for the other is never entirely free of a search for the self. The poet's pursuit of her corporeal 'relation' – that is, her father – might also be the pursuit of a conceptual connection between her father and herself that may illuminate facets of the self and facilitate her own poetic expression. Consider, for example, the following extract from a poem in 'Secret History of the Dividing Line':

Close at hand the ocean
until before
hidden from our vision
MARK
border
bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position
hence a sign or token
impression or trace

(1996: 90)

The extract initially sifts through ideas of proximity and distance: like the archive, 'the ocean' may be 'close at hand', but it holds within its space vast, unexplored depths. The word 'before' embraces both the idea of an encounter with the dead and a notion of pastness that is shrouded, 'hidden from our vision', before the startling appearance of 'MARK'. The physicality of 'MARK', raised in upper-case letters, is a lexical attempt to encompass the plenitude of Howe's father, Mark De Wolfe Howe, while also noting the barriers to comprehension and assimilation: the words 'border', bulwark', and 'boundary' in quick succession signify reassuring marks of presence that simultaneously guard against incursion. Howe's father's name becomes a notable mark, or inscription, in Howe's poem that itself explores various strands of meaning of the word 'mark' in order to establish its own mark on the page.

In a further interweaving of the self and the other, the 'trace' of Howe's father reaches behind to retrieve traces of his own history that are a precursor to Susan Howe's contemporary poetic practice. Like his daughter, Howe's father also pursued traces of historical figures in his own work – in his academic writing, he was the editor of Oliver

Wendell Holmes Jr's letters,[24] and the author of a two-volume Holmes biography.[25] Noting a further connective between her father's life and her own, Howe recalls in an interview that 'my father […] was obsessed by footnotes' (Keller and Howe 1995: 27), suggesting that he, like his daughter, spent much of his time in a marginal Underworld – below the dividing line between primary and secondary bodies of text – retrieving fragments of the dead and bringing them into the space of his own work.

In this light, and with further relevance for Susan Howe's exploration of 'mark' as a lexical and conceptual link between the self and the other, it is worth noting Craig Dworkin's remark that 'the margin has always harbored a sense of writing; the word ultimately derives from the same Indo-European base as *mark*, relating the margin not only to boundaries but also to traces, inscriptions, and memorials' (2013: 40). The derivation of 'margin' from 'mark' and its link to 'inscriptions, and memorials' might also illuminate the path of Susan Howe's work, reaching back to retrieve fragments of the self. Howe's archival searches – on the margin of life and death – are not only a displaced search for her father, but also a re-tracing of both his steps and those of his father before him, also called Mark, who was an editor and author.[26] Susan Howe observes that 'curiosity over stilled voices and papers was what they bequeathed me', and that when she is 'researching a subject I often find grandpa has been there before me' (Gardner 2006: 161).

Susan Howe also encounters in the archive nineteenth-century American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose own words from his short story 'The Birth-mark'[27] are reprinted in Howe's *The Birth-mark*, an exploration of early American literature and its influence on her own poetry and archival searches. Howe observes in *The Birth-mark* that, like herself, Hawthorne was 'a cormorant of libraries' (1993a: 5) and according to his sister covered books in the house with his own scribblings. Such marks and signs, followed in turn by '[t]he marginal marks Herman Melville made in his copy of

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[24] *Touched With Fire: Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, ed. by Mark De Wolfe Howe (Harvard University Press: 1946).

[25] Mark De Wolfe Howe, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Vol. 1, The Shaping Years, 1841-1870* (Belknap: 1957); *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Vol. 2, The Proving Years, 1870-1882* (Belknap: 1963).

[26] Mark Antony De Wolfe Howe (1864-1960), author of *Barrett Wendell and his Letters* (Atlantic Monthly Press: 1924).

[27] Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story 'The Birth-mark' was first published in March 1843 by *The Pioneer: A Literary and Critical Magazine*, and later appeared in Hawthorne's short-story collection, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Wiley & Putnam: 1846).

Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*' (1993a: 9), constitute the path followed by Howe's work – through archival strata that are inlaid with impressions of the self.[28]

Howe's search for fragments of the self, via fragments of her father and grandfather, is also inextricably interwoven with the origins of America, its New England colonial history; she was born in New England – Boston, Massachusetts – and grew up in nearby Cambridge. In 1630, John Winthrop led a Puritan migration of 900 colonists from England to Massachusetts Bay and was one of the principal founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the first major settlement in New England following the establishment of Plymouth Colony ten years earlier. Howe's father, a professor at Harvard, was, Howe admits, 'fascinated by the Puritans' (Howe 1993a: 161), suggesting that when Howe traces the footsteps of her father, she is also tracing the footsteps of the first settlers in her place of birth in what is a displaced search for her own origins. In this sense, Howe demonstrates that the elegist's encounter with the unavoidable presence of the other is equally an encounter with the unavoidable presence of the self. Marjorie Perloff remarks that Howe 'is not […] a chronicler, telling us some Indian story from the New England past, but a poet trying to come to terms with *her* New England past, *her* sense of herself vis-à-vis the Colonial settlers' actions' (1989: 533).

In his examination of attitudes towards death in Puritan New England, David Stannard relates that when Winthrop and his colonists travelled to Massachusetts Bay, they would have had a very particular idea of what awaited them in the New World: '[A] fleet of eleven ships […] set sail from England for the New World. […] It was, they were told, a barbarous and howling wilderness infested with demons and peopled with a mysterious and threatening race of men' (1977: 42). The notion of 'wilderness' acquires particular potency for a poet whose densely constructed collages enact the complexity of pursuing a distant and unfathomable other in a murky Underworld. Just as Orpheus is compelled to revisit his own history by retrieving Eurydice and bringing her back to presence in his own present, Howe remarks that 'I feel compelled in my work to go back […] to the invasion or settling […] of *this* place' (1993a: 164), showing that the elegy's repeated momentum *towards* the dead is driven by a compulsion to move backwards, *away* from the present.

[28] In a piece entitled 'Preface' in 'Melville's Marginalia', Howe writes: 'Melville read with a pencil in his hand. Marks he made in the margins of his books are often a conversation with the dead' (1993b: 89).

The English Puritan settlers in New England were Calvinists, who, Howe notes, 'voluntarily severed themselves from their origins to cross the northern ocean on a religious and utopian errand into the wilderness', and for whom 'God's infinite and absolute sovereignty were conceived in terms of legal authority' (1985: 38).[29] She adds that '[i]t was this profound conception of obedience to a stern and sovereign Absence that forged the fanatical energy necessary for survival' (1985: 39). Howe, too, is acutely aware of a 'sovereign Absence' in the shape of her father and her wider ancestry. In following the path of the known and the unknown dead through archival strata, which incorporate the origins of America – the place where her own origins were born – Howe demonstrates that the elegy might be a space in which to encounter the historical presence and the present absence of the precursive other.

Conclusion

Susan Howe's retrieval of textual fragments from the archive, and their subsequent incorporation into her contemporary poetic space, raises questions about the performance of language in elegy – and specifically, how language might approach the archived dead in such a way as to foreground otherness and unfamiliarity. Her collages, which accommodate the potential for verbal, visual and aural expression, enact encounters with absent others that aim for a recovery of the dead, while simultaneously noting by implication what is left behind in the process of elegiac retrieval. If the elegist has an ethical responsibility to give a voice to a silent other, then how can language constitute that voice, and what steps might the elegist take to avoid assimilating the words of the other into the words of the self? The complexity of Howe's work, which frequently lacks a discernible narrative and suggests the value of incoherence over intelligibility, presents a radical obstacle to understanding for the reader that reflects the significant challenge for the poet in displaying the intricacies of her negotiation with the overtakelessness of the dead.

[29] According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Calvinism [is] the theology advanced by John Calvin, a Protestant reformer in the 16th century, and its development by his followers. […] In the Anglo-Saxon world, Calvinist notions found embodiment in English Puritanism, whose ethos proved vastly influential in North America beginning in the 17th century. It seems likely, therefore, that Calvinism's appeal was based on its ability to explain disorders of the age afflicting all classes and to provide comfort by its activism and doctrine', <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/90293/Calvinism> [accessed 18 April 2014].

Will Montgomery observes of Howe's work that '[t]he difficulty of her poetry […] is a necessary difficulty that has its origins in the problems that confront a poetry of witness when what it seeks to memorialize has vanished' (2010: xii). In Howe's work, the obstacle to encountering the elegised other is exacerbated by the secondary burial of the other in archival strata that have been compressed and solidified by the passage of time. Those whom she seeks to recover in the present have frequently 'vanished' not only from a corporeal existence, but also from living memory; even a knowledge of her own father is made problematic by the years he spent apart from his daughter. In the first three stanzas of an untitled poem from 'Secret History of the Dividing Line', Howe conveys the coexistence of presence and absence with the use of fragmented language and white space:

O
where ere
he He A

ere I were
wher

father father

(1996: 93)

The extract appears to enact an extended stutter that suggests the semi-coherent articulation of the 'I' and the 'he' – an encounter between the elegist and the elegised other. Individual words fracture, reflecting the fact that the elegist's negotiation with the overtakelessness of the dead brings unbearable pressure to bear on language – in line 2, the word 'ere', suggestive of a distant past, is a shard that breaks off 'where', which appears in a more unfathomable form as 'wher' in line 5. The fragments do resolve into a repeated 'father father' in the final line of the above extract, but the echoing words can only name in impersonal terms the object of their pursuit, rather than fleshing out his presence in the poem. The increased amount of white space between the two instances of 'father' points towards a pursuit of the other that refuses closure – with all the implications of assimilation and completed mourning that the word brings with it – in preference for a figuring of the other as an enigmatic trace, which resists comprehension.

Given the absence of the other, Howe's use of white space in the above extract may also serve as a visual representation of absence on the page; the poet shapes an irresolvable gap between words that signifies the void left by the lost other and the inability of language to articulate the precise nature of that void. In this light, Richard Stamelman observes of the relationship between poetry and loss that, given '[t]he emptiness of loss', it is perhaps most appropriately expressed by 'the emptiness of expression' because 'the unrepresentability of loss […] can be "represented" only by absences: by missing words, gestures, movements, expressions' (1990: 12). The emptiness that is silently depicted between 'father' and 'father' in the final line of the above extract, in tandem with the wider expanse of white space that surrounds the words of the poem as a whole, suggests that, however much poetic language engages in pursuit of the lost other, it will fall short and be forced to give way to absence. Is it the case, wonders Howe's poem, that if the other cannot be made fully present by language, then the other might at least be indicated to the reader by what is *not* present? Through her use of white space, Howe shows the emptiness – as opposed to the elusive plenitude of the elegised other – that lies at the heart of poetic mourning.

Howe's work frequently eludes straightforward classification – her textual collages, for instance, fashion a particular space that in its liminality bears resemblance to the archive from which Howe draws her material fragments. Archives lure the explorer with the promise of treading the ground that the dead occupy, but the 'omissions, restrictions, repressions, and exclusions' (Collis 2006: 19) of this territory serve to foreground, rather like the condition of overtakelessness, precisely what cannot be recovered. Howe's retrieval of bodily traces rather than an imagined version of the whole, as well as her attention to the visual, textual and sonic possibilities of the poetic page, serves to establish an encounter – and a relation – with the dead that strives to observe the otherness of lost others.

Through its configuration on the page, Howe's work draws attention to the amorphousness of a poetic encounter with loss. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, it is as difficult to arrive at a conclusive definition of contemporary elegy as it is to capture the dead in their essential fullness. Howe's work reinforces this initial proposition, while also pointing towards the ways in which elegy might begin its work in the space of an unclassifiable frontier between life and death, and indicating what might

be done for the dead given the particular limitations of the printed page. W. David Shaw remarks that '[s]ince death is not an experience inside life, but an event that takes place on its boundary, every elegy sooner or later reaches the limits of language' (1994: 5). Given that 'what we mourn in an elegy', adds Shaw, 'is never simply the other but the limits of our own understanding and a loss in ourselves' (1994: 244), it raises the question of what elegy can do not only for the dead, but also for the living elegist. Specifically, as I will examine in the next chapter, how can the language of elegy address the emotions of a poet whose loss is both personal and immediate?

Chapter 2

'How Can I Not Reach Where You Are': Points of Failure in Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy*

Introduction

In Chapter 1, Susan Howe's exploration of the frontier between the known and the unknown is not described simply in terms of encounters between the living and the dead; more precisely, Howe's work incorporates known others from her personal history – her father and her husband – and unknown figures such as Hannah Edwards, whose words Howe retrieves from the archive and juxtaposes with those of miscellaneous others. Howe's recovery of bodily traces – figured as textual fragments and passages of opaque poetry – suggests a recognition of the incompleteness that characterises overtakelessness and those whom it encloses. The others that she seeks to recover in her contemporary space might have disappeared not only from a corporeal existence, but also from living memory. Even a knowledge of her father, whose own history is inextricably bound up with Howe's, is occluded by his years of absence while he was alive. Howe's suggestion that her archival exploration might be a displaced search for her father, who also pursued traces of lost others in his work, indicates a measure of the historical, temporal and emotional boundaries that separate Howe from those she pursues. But in what ways is the landscape of elegy altered when the poet is confronted by the unexpected death of her son, prompting her to produce an immediate response in a collection of lyric poems?

Mary Jo Bang[1] began writing the poems that were eventually published in her volume *Elegy* (2007) directly following her 37-year-old son's sudden death from an overdose of prescription drugs.[2] In this context, R. Clifton Spargo's observation of the ethical

[1] Bang's first volume of poetry *Apology for Want* (University Press of New England) appeared in 1997, followed by *Louise in Love* (Grove Press: 2001) and *The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans* (University of Georgia Press: 2001). The poems in her fourth collection *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (Grove Press: 2004) take as their inspiration artists' works dating from 1 BC to 2003. Following *Elegy* (Graywolf Press: 2007), Bang published *The Bride of E* (Graywolf: 2009), an abecedarius.

[2] Michael Donner Van Hook died on 20 June 2004, according to *The New York Times*, 24 June 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/24/classified/paid-notice-deaths-van-hook-michael-donner.html> [accessed 16 May 2014]. In his review of *Elegy*, Joel Brouwer writes: 'A statement from Bang accompanying my review copy of her new book explains that her grown son died in 2004, and that "it wasn't clear in the days following, nor is it clear now, whether it was an accident or whether it was a decisive act"' (2008: 526).

obligations that are initiated by the event of death, discussed in Chapter 1, has direct emotional and physical relevance to an elegist who is acutely aware of the way in which her maternal responsibilities intersect with her poetic responsibilities to the lost other. Given the precise circumstances of her son's death, there is a literal truth – as opposed to Howe's metaphorical application – for Bang in the onset of what Spargo terms 'responsibility's conception, when another who was vulnerable and about to die called for our protection' (2004: 6), which illuminates Bang's perception that she failed to fulfil her responsibilities to her son. Consequently, Bang's elegies are suffused with the guilt and frustration that might be expected from any parent who has outlived a child; but in the more specific sense applicable to Bang, the poet as mother – and designated protector of the child – was not present at the site of loss at the time of death and was therefore unable to protect her child when he was perhaps at his most 'vulnerable'.

Howe's poetic reality – the harbouring of the words of the dead within the body of her work – acquires for Bang a physical reality that resides in the maternal sheltering and protection of her son through pregnancy, into childhood, and beyond. Whereas for Howe the preservation of the words of *the other* acquires primary significance, Bang is thrust directly into a crisis that puts her *own* words under intense scrutiny. Given the suggestion of Howe's work that coherent, comprehensible textual material is inadequate as a marker of the presence of the other, what are the particular obstacles faced by Bang's more conventional lyric form? And in view of the overtakelessness of the elegised other – explored primarily by Howe through historical figures and a distant father – what tensions arise in work that aims to recover a dead child?

In the first stanza of 'Words', Bang writes that 'I wasn't there | When something happened' (2007: 54), showing that a potential response to the residual guilt of the mother in not being present to protect her son is to attempt to reassert a measure of control in her poetic space. In this way, the absent other may be recovered poetically and temporarily stabilised following his sudden physical disappearance; according to Bang, in an interview with Jennifer Kronovet, 'the page becomes a space where a conversation continues. The beloved stays in the world for the duration of the writing' (2008). *Elegy* is notable for the strictly controlled period during which her poems were produced – Bang began writing the elegies almost immediately after her son died in

June 2004, and she stopped abruptly almost exactly a year later.[3] Such precise measurement underpins the construction of the book itself, which follows a chronological path through 'September is' (p. 19), 'November Elegy' (p. 28), 'January Elegy' (p. 31), 'February Elegy' (p. 38), and 'April is Ending' (p. 69), before the penultimate poem, 'Anniversary' (p. 87). Chronologically, the book describes a carefully calculated forward trajectory, but it is a motion that is drawn inexorably towards the anniversary of her son's death – which took place a year previously – suggesting that the elegist's attempt to regain control of the scene of death ultimately meets the precise event which threw her world into disarray.

It can also be construed from Bang's regretful admission, above, that 'I wasn't there | When something happened' that a recovery of control in the scene of elegy might also lead to a recovery of the self. The absent 'I' at the actual site of loss – the location where her son died – may be in some measure retrieved at the poetic site of mourning by means of a translation into her elegies of the raw potency of her feelings surrounding personal loss. Can language register the elegist's presence in the sphere of emotional expression, even as she is forced to admit her previous absence in the immediate sphere of loss? Bang's own reflection on *Elegy* gives an impression of the severe stress under which her poetry operates:

> I suppose I was trying to give shape to a state of disbelief and horror and regret and a terrible missing. All of those words I've just used, as large as they are, fail, the way the poems ultimately fail, to accurately measure the emotion.
>
> (Kronovet 2008)

There is in Bang's opening phrase, 'I suppose I was trying to give shape […]', an implicit recognition that her frequent use of the first-person 'I' in *Elegy* represents her repeated attempt to convey in written language the intensity of the emotion that she is experiencing. However, as I will show later in this chapter, Bang's efforts at even communicating her feelings, let alone measuring them 'accurately', are disabled by the very words she uses – not least the first-person 'I', which carries no more guarantee of authenticity than, say, the third-person 'she'. Furthermore, Bang's phrase might indicate

[3] Bang reveals in an interview that the poems that appear in *Elegy* were not originally intended for publication, but were written as a way of dealing with the immediate emotional effects of her son's death: '"I began to write poems as a way of doing many things: one, escaping a state of extreme suffering for a few minutes"' (Benson 2008). After she stopped writing the elegies, individual poems were accepted for publication in magazines, before Graywolf published Bang's collection in 2007.

her underlying hope that the successful articulation of such feelings as 'disbelief and horror and regret' will give poetic shape and presence to a self that was absent at the actual scene of loss. In these circumstances, it appears, the *definition* of the self – both in terms of an accurate description, as it might be subjectively conceived, and the attribution to the self of a degree of distinctness – hinges on the extent to which Bang can define exactly what she is feeling in the wake of the death of her son.

However, Bang's attempted shaping of 'a terrible missing' suggests not only her sense of regret and sadness at the absence of her son, but also the failure of her attempted recovery of the elegised. In other words, what is 'missing' in her elegies is the absent other in his fullness, which merely accentuates her feelings of loss. Her failure to recreate the shape of her once-living son in her poetic space recalls the chronological thrust of the book that reaches forward in time, only to be confronted by the shape of his loss, harboured by the anniversary of his death. In microcosm, 'those words I've just used' – that is, 'disbelief', 'horror', 'regret', 'missing' – are as distant from Bang's raw emotion as she remains from the elegised other in the broader sweep of her volume as a whole. How can the elegist's words 'accurately measure the emotion' when intense grief is frequently inarticulable?

In a discussion of the disparity between the felt emotion of loss and an attempted capturing of this emotion on the page, Karen Weisman remarks that 'elegy marks a passage from the inchoate gasp to the formalized utterance, from the chaos of the mind to the ordered presentation of a publicly available expression' (2010: 1). The sense of 'regret' that Bang aims to foreground in *Elegy* resides as much in the difficulty of executing the poetic 'passage' to authentic and eventually public emotion that Weisman indicates, as it does in the ultimate failure of her poetry to negotiate a route to the elegised other following her terrible missing of the event of his death:

How could I have failed you like this?
The narrator asks

The object. The object is a box
Of ashes. How could I not have saved you,

A boy made of bone and blood.

(2007: 24)

By means of her rhetorical question, 'how could I not have saved you' in 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', Bang indicates the intersection of the poetic and the personal as she locates her failure in her maternal shortcomings – her own incapacity for protection – and the subsequent inability of her poetry to recover and protect the authentic shape of her son in the plenitude of his previous presence, 'a boy made of bone and blood'. The artifice of the poem, which *makes* a version of the elegised other in the present, serves as an implied counterpoint to the previous incarnation of the elegised other as a *made* human being, his physical components fashioned and nurtured within the maternal body. In the language of Bang's elegy, both the 'I' and the 'you' are anonymised – stripped of the unique flesh that shapes their presence – by their new roles as 'narrator' and 'object'. What has been 'saved' within the space of Bang's poem – a matter-of-fact linguistic representation, 'a box | Of ashes', of what is in any case a fragmented representation of the former shape of her living son – is a marker of how language has the capacity to exacerbate the distance between the elegist and the elegised. Or to put it another way, what is saved by the elegy is a measure of how much has been lost.

In this chapter, I will examine Bang's attempt to save previous – and apparently more stable – incarnations of both the 'I' and the 'you' in an effort to counteract the precariousness inflicted on both her maternal and poetic life by her personal loss and the convulsive emotions that this loss invokes. By means of her fashioning of a fantasy world – wherein her son is frequently re-imagined as a child – can the elegist protect herself from the deleterious effects of grief and preserve both the self and the other from the stark reality of overtakelessness? Spargo remarks of poetic mourning that '[a]s they imagine the tremendous burden of an intimacy that cannot be met, elegies typically resort to idealizing the other in order to defend against this burden and to imagine a self-sustaining fiction of intimacy' (2004: 130). Further to this observation, Bang's particular poetic response to loss may satisfy a maternal impulse to idealise her son in the face of his sudden shattering, and she may find solace in 'a self-sustaining fiction of intimacy', but in what way might this approach satisfy the reader's own potential demands of elegy – that it should perhaps be a graphic and authentic expression of grief, especially in view of the biographical backdrop of Bang's work?

I will consider the effects of this pressure – potentially inflicted not only by the elegist herself but also by an expectant reader – on lyric poetry that struggles with the

constraints of its own form to communicate raw grief. In a review of *Elegy*, David Orr writes that '[t]he closer a poet is to the subject he elegizes, the more we expect him to respond in ways that aren't "poetic"', but because language falls short in its attempts to articulate feelings that essentially inhabit a space outside language, 'the elegist […] finds himself in the awkward position of orchestrating a death wail' (2008). How does the tension between grief and its poetic expression show itself in Bang's work? I will demonstrate that Denise Riley's work on language and interpellation is particularly pertinent to an examination of Bang's poetry and raises a specific question regarding elegy – if the elegist is not in control of her own words, then how can she bring either her emotion or the ineffable other to the page?

The Language Problem

Bang's stated wish 'to accurately measure the emotion' in the elegies written after her son's death may be construed as an attempt to regain control of the scene of elegy, to make the self present – by means of poetic language – where previously it was absent from the site of loss. But the implicit assumption of Bang's declared intention is that language can be brought entirely within her control – that it can be mastered and encompassed, even if the elegised himself remains elusive. Bang suggests a hope – albeit one that is ultimately extinguished – that her words can be shepherded and brought within the confines of the conscious mind, and that language as it appears on the page might be intact and fully comprehended without any unfathomable surplus.

However, Denise Riley notes that the poet must encounter not only the uncertainty of her own unconscious but also that of 'language itself', which, she writes, 'can also be argued to have an unconscious of its very own and to possess a remainder, to be at the mercy of the invasive determinations of sound associations, of the wild and fruitful propagations of metaphor, and so on' (2000: 12-13). What are the implications for an elegist who attempts to recover the dead in words that also 'possess a remainder'? That is to say, if the poet's language – like the elegised other – has an unfathomable surplus that cannot be encompassed, and therefore cannot be entirely controlled, then any attempt at satisfactory expression is likely to be compromised. Or, as Riley puts it, in such circumstances, 'the speaker and the writer become even less the masters of their utterance' (2000: 13) than they are already, given that language – which harbours an

unconscious element – is at least part of what inhabits the writer's own unconscious and therefore remains beyond the conscious reach and control of the elegist.

The metaphor-rich territory of Bang's poetry indicates an integral obstacle for an elegist who is aiming to measure her emotion in the immediate aftermath of the loss of her son. In his discussion of the problems experienced in the representation of loss, Richard Stamelman remarks that '[i]n giving presence to images and metaphors, language points to its own inadequacy at ever being able to express the void of absence' (1990: 23). What is present in the poem is not the elegised in his previous corporeal reality, but a collection of representative linguistic marks that, in their effort to shape the elegised other, merely confirm his absence. Bang's words could not save her son on the page; rather, their separation – in both a linguistic and a temporal sense – from the actual event of his loss serves to confirm the hollowness of their expression to the elegist:

> She came from the room.
> On the table, the empty vessel of the word "missing"
> In figurative and literal language.
>
> (2007: 32)

In 'No Exit', Bang indicates the meeting point of her lived and poetic realities – the 'literal' missing of the event of her son's death mingles with a 'figurative' missing of his physical presence in her subsequent poetry. What is contained within her actual experience of missing her son is an inarticulable grief, such that 'the word "missing"' is, in the space of the page, an 'empty vessel', unable even to approximate what she is feeling. When Bang metaphorises the word 'missing' – which is itself a linguistic representation that stands in for her emotion – as a static physical object that contains Stamelman's 'void of absence', she effectively points out the process of separation enacted by the poem. In his discussion of the performance of language in the work of literature, Maurice Blanchot observes that 'everything is word, yet the word is itself no longer anything but the appearance of what has disappeared' (1982: 44), suggesting a particular relevance for Bang's phrasing in the above extract from her poem. What is missing from the word 'missing' is the substance of what constitutes Bang's emotion behind the word; what has disappeared in the poem is not only the presence of her son, but also the reality of raw grief.

For Bang, the elusive nature of what has disappeared both illuminates and becomes entangled with the elusive nature of 'the word […] itself' – in particular, the word that might capture and measure her emotion. But the language of loss frequently takes the form of a non-language, and the elegist is faced with the problem of how to fashion what Riley calls 'a myriad emotions never verbally shaped, stubbornly resistant to being voiced' (2000: 36). Whereas in Chapter 1, Howe considers the complexities of giving a voice to a 'stubbornly resistant' other, Bang discovers that her own authentic voice is out of reach. Bang finds that it is not simply that language fails when it is most required, but that grief in its most unrestrained condition might inhabit a world entirely beyond verbal articulation. Brian Massumi offers a clue as to why the elegist might be forced to relinquish the gritty core of such immediate, unprocessed feelings when he addresses the question of the 'autonomic nature of affect' and the fact that 'conventional discourse' runs 'counter to the full registering of affect and its affirmation, […] its expression as and for itself' (2002: 28). In other words, the affect as it might appear on the page is a processed second order, concerned with making raw feelings intelligible for the reader.

Massumi adds that the processing of affect into a more recognisable and capturable emotion, to the point where it can be articulated, means that something of the immediacy of the affect is lost:

> Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture* – and of the fact that something has always and again escaped.
>
> (2002: 35)

Massumi's observation that 'something has always and again escaped' serves as a reminder of the irretrievable fullness of the elegised other and that the elegy can only give shape to its object by averting its gaze from the dead. Bang must confront the fact that in order to make affect intelligible and measurable – to 'capture' what she is feeling – then she must turn away from her own immeasurable and unmeasurable 'intensity', since '[e]motion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions' (Massumi 2002: 28). In Chapter 1, the disruption of 'semantically […] formed progressions' in Howe's textual collages suggests that what would escape in a more 'conventional' poetic construction is the essential quality of otherness that the poet is trying to preserve. In Bang's work, the

attempted capture of unrestrained feeling by means of the written word in a more mainstream lyric form appears to risk the escape of precisely the emotion that she is trying to enclose. Her awareness of this at times appears acute:

THE CRUEL WHEEL TURNS TWICE

And tightens until language can't bear this
Hollowing, crash cart, Please. In the silence,
A bus slithers by

A din.

(2007: 12)

Bang tries to escape from her own recognition of the inefficacy of language in the face of loss when she engineers the breakdown of logical semantic progression in the second line of the opening stanza, culminating in 'Please', with its initial capital. She implies that what 'language can't bear' is the weight of the poet's unexpressed grief and its own hollowness in the aftermath of death, such that an appeal for 'silence' – ushered into the poem by the appearance of the word 'Please' followed by a full point – appears the only prospect of relief from the elegist's suffering. The notion of a 'cruel wheel' in the title of Bang's poem recalls the circular track followed by *Elegy* as it ultimately returns to 'Anniversary', a date that appears to harbour her son but serves merely as a permanently recurring reminder of his absence. For Bang there is, as she admits, an added layer to her grief and sense of poetic failure that is rooted in the fact that the individual for whom she is writing her elegies is the one person who can't be located: 'I suspect the intended audience for all elegies is the one who has gone. The fact that the gone aren't able to read only creates more anguish, which then dictates another elegy. It's the horrible hamster wheel of grief' (Kronovet 2008).

Bang implies in the above extract from 'The Cruel Wheel Turns Twice' that the elegised might not be the only 'one who has gone' – metaphorical constructions effectively displace the poet as the repository for grief and anguish with the result that the self is placed at an even greater distance from the elegised other. The one tangible sound is not from a human source, but a machine that assumes the form of a primitive creature as it 'slithers by', indicating that the inanimate 'bus' may have more capacity for an uncompromising 'din' than the human speaker. A couplet in Denise Riley's 'A Part Song', written following the death of her own adult son Jacob in 2008, executes a

similar displacement: 'A wardrobe gapes, a mourner tries | Her several styles of howling-guise' (2012a: 14).[4] The notion of trying on mourning and/or funeral garb has broader implications for the elegy: Riley's image illuminates the ways in which language deploys different techniques and 'styles' in an effort to bring the inarticulate howl to presence by describing it and therefore missing it altogether. Grief is forced into the guise of lexical clothing, which misrepresents and conceals – the description of the self as 'a mourner' in Riley's couplet has a similar neutralising effect to Bang's self-referential 'narrator' from 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', noted above. Riley's gaping wardrobe is itself a representation of open-mouthed amazement at the event of death. But the physical reaction – and the implied emotion that accompanies it – is expressed by an inanimate object, conveying the woodenness of the cry of anguish when it is placed within a structure of artifice, the poem.

The tightening of language in the extract from Bang's 'The Cruel Wheel Turns Twice', above, where logical semantic progression runs into the staccato rhythm and opaque content of 'hollowing, crash cart, Please', enacts a metaphorical choking, the meeting point for an upsurge of untrammeled emotion and a constricted poetic outlet. Roland Barthes notes the general implications for any writer of the distance between the mind and the page when he remarks that '[w]hat ends up as writing are erratic little clumps of ruins when compared to a complicated and splendid *ensemble*'. He adds that 'that is the problem of writing: how to put up with the fact that the great flood I have within me leads in the best of cases to a rivulet of writing' (1985: 329). The passage from 'flood' to 'rivulet' acquires extra relevance for an elegist such as Bang, for whom the disjunction between her intense grief at the loss of her son and the pale impression of such grief that appears in her elegies might be difficult to bear.

There is also in Barthes's metaphor a hint of an inexorable progression to aridity that might apply to an elegist who finds that language fails to invest her individual experience of death and mourning with sufficient intensity and personal significance. Michael Mendelson observes that the poetic mourner may find herself falling into the trap of cliché and succumbing to sentimentality because '[t]here is an evasive cheapness

[4] Poem 'vi', in 'A Part Song', a numbered sequence of twenty short poems, first published in the print edition of *London Review of Books* on 9 February 2012, and subsequently online, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n03/denise-riley/a-part-song> [accessed 25 March 2014].

that constantly haunts our discourse on Death, a clichéd inelegance where every utterance seems one utterance too late. Predictable are the words; predictable are the pauses between the words' (2004: 188). The notion of being 'too late' has particular relevance for Bang, who misses the opportunity to protect her son at the moment of his vulnerability, and whose language then fails to save his uniqueness, a shaped singularity on the page that might have in some small way offset his loss.

The scepticism of Barthes's view is reinforced by Patrick McGuinness in his Afterword to Stéphane Mallarmé's *For Anatole's Tomb* when McGuinness remarks that death has 'a terminal chasm which cannot be imagined away', so the poet intent on using 'the vocabulary of continuity' is faced by 'the insistence of words denoting […] loss' (2003: 96).[5] This may have an adverse effect on the elegist's imagination when she discovers it is unequal to the struggle with language. When Bang enacts a conversation with her son in 'Talk to Me', it is mechanical and colourless:

Talk to me, he said.
The narrative begins and we fill in the blanks.
The kind of grammar. The color and tone
Of the tense. There's always an exception
But there's always a rule.
The rudderless language

Of everyday life.
Talk to me and tell me, what
In the world. This from the man
Who would turn to a stone.

(2007: 53)

As noted in the Introduction to this chapter, Bang reveals that she enacts a retrieval of her dead son by means of the conversation that continues in the space of the page; in this way, she adds, '[t]he beloved stays in the world for the duration of the writing' (Kronovet 2008). But her reporting of such a conversation in the above extract betrays a feeling that such a recovery can only be partial: the poet reveals that 'we fill in the blanks', but beyond a declaration of this event, there is no substantive evidence to support a bridged divide; the elegy may declare its intent to restore the dead to a full

[5] In the Introduction to *For Anatole's Tomb*, McGuinness reveals that Mallarmé's eight-year-old son died in October 1879 after a short illness. He describes Mallarmé's unfinished work as '210 sheets of pencilled notes towards a poem about the death of Anatole. These notes did not appear in Mallarmé's lifetime, and there are no references to a work in progress in his correspondence' (2003: vii).

and comprehensible presence, but its words say otherwise. Language is characterised by its incompleteness and lack of defined direction – it is 'rudderless' – as well as by its vagueness, 'the kind of grammar'. The 'color and tone | Of the *tense*' (my emphasis) plays on the juxtaposition of past and present, but also on the anxiety of the poet as she attempts to bring the individual dead to presence. Not only would the son 'turn to a stone' because of his death and absence, but in the space of the conversation being enacted on the page he is also turning to speak to 'a stone' – the elegist who has been immobilised by her disconnection not only from the elegised, but also from language, and from the singularity of her experience. In 'Now', these obstacles are foregrounded:

Now, she said, do you know
How I feel? No, he said,

I know nothing.
I'm only, as you've described me,

Ash in a box. No, she said,
That's not what I meant

When I said that. You are everything
And that. It's ironic

Language that has described you that way.
You are reduced

To the after-sorrow
That will last my lifetime. The hair-tearing

Grief of the mother
Whose child has been swept away

By the needle broom
Of all her mindless errors.

What she'd meant to say was that
The body as ash is inadequate.

(2007: 60)

Language is depicted as a reductive instrument, rather than a tool that might allow the elegist to measure her emotion accurately: following her son's complaint that he has been described as 'ash in a box', the poet's response, 'you are everything' appears to demonstrate personal significance but in fact generalises in its non-specificity. The antonym of 'everything' is both explicit in her son's revelation that 'I know nothing' –

intimating his knowledge of the unfathomable void that his mother is unable to encompass – and implicit in the poet's admission that 'you are reduced || To […] after-sorrow', an emotion that is intangible and inexpressible in the space of the poem. The elegy resonates with a sense of the poet's culpability in the third stanza when she makes a plea for her words not to be misunderstood and in the penultimate stanza when she makes an explicit admission of 'mindless errors'.

In his discussion of American family elegy, Jahan Ramazani notes 'the heightened guilt' that 'often involves in elegies for children the failure to […] prevent a final separation' (1994: 255). For Bang, the 'final separation' of mother and child enacted by her son's death is compounded by the poet's failure to prevent a further separation in the space of the poem when language fails to re-establish a satisfactory connection between the elegist and the absent other. In the final couplet of Bang's poem, above, she shows that in literal terms, the 'body' of her son is 'inadequate' in its reduced form as 'ash'; in poetic terms, the word 'body', just like the word 'ash', is ineffectual as a means of successfully retrieving the elegised. Further, Bang indicates that the body of the poem is incapable of satisfactory expression – to make words perform their desired function to the satisfaction of an elegist who wishes to measure her emotion. Ostensibly, Bang gives shape to her disbelief and horror in lines that reveal 'the hair-tearing || Grief of the mother', but grief is lost as soon as it is named – it becomes word rather than emotion – and 'the mother' empties the self of identity even as it connects with a notion of the maternal body.

There is a notable moment in the above elegy where the poet interjects in her imagined conversation with her dead son. She appears to disclaim responsibility for the words 'ash in a box' when she announces, 'that's not what I meant || When I said that', claiming instead that 'it's ironic || Language that has described you that way'. The notion of the elegist's words acting as an autonomous entity, freed to some extent from the attempted controls of the self, resonates strongly with Riley's observation, above, that language has an unconscious of its own; that its 'remainder', as she puts it, remains out of reach of the writer. Riley's reflection on a writer's potential response to the discovery of what she has written might help to unearth the subtext of Bang's imagined explanation to her son: 'Who, me? I couldn't have written that – well, all right, my wrist and hand did, but it wasn't my self at work' (Riley 2000: 91). There is a tension here between the 'I' and the

'self' that has particular implications for a poet whose declared intention is to measure her emotion by means of her poetry. What impact does the implied precariousness of the first-person pronoun have on elegies that are inevitably suffused with a strong autobiographical flavour?

The Unreliable 'I'

Bang's frequent use of the first-person pronoun in *Elegy* might indicate a poet who is trying to merge her personal and poetic identities; a perception that the 'I' of the mother may be allowed to enter the poetic space and address the guilt and frustration that emanated from the missing of her son's death. In this way, the 'I' that is trying to give shape to raw grief might suggest a unified self that could in some way authenticate the emotion that she wishes to measure. The notion of a true account, as much as it can ever be proved, may appear more of a convincing proposition and more closely tied to the notion of accuracy when it emanates from the speaking 'I'. Riley claims that this is because '[a]ny *I* seems to speak for and from herself; her utterance comes from her own mouth in the first person pronoun which is hers, if only for just so long as she pronounces it' (2000: 57). There is an ostensible ownership of the first-person pronoun, but the moment it is released either verbally or inscribed on the page – that is, once it leaves the mouth or the hand that has articulated it – it acquires a detached quality that according to Riley makes '[t]he *I* […] simultaneously everyone's everywhere; it's the linguistic marker of rarity but is always also aggressively democratic' (2000: 57-58). There is a non-specificity and an interchangeability to the 'I' that give it a quality of being deeply personal and at the same time universal.

Furthermore, the impulse that launches *Elegy* – born in the immediate aftermath of a mother's loss of her child – does not necessarily confer any guarantee of authenticity on the words that issue from the poet. The autobiographical text is constructed by external forces – by events that have taken place outside the 'I' – and is articulated through language that has arrived at the site of the 'I' by a process of channelling through others. In this regard, it appears that Bang's hope of an intact 'I' – a controlled and controllable self that might act as a conduit through which her emotion can be conducted and accurately measured – has fragile foundations.

Nothing can be termed purely interior – that is, innately 'I' – because to some extent at least, according to Riley, material has arrived from sources outside the self: 'My autobiography always arrives from somewhere outside me; my narrating *I* is really anybody's, promiscuously' (2000: 58). Rather in the manner that language as a whole possesses what Riley termed earlier a 'remainder', so the 'I' as a specific component of language also appears to incorporate a surplus that is undefined and unfathomable, adding a further layer of complexity to the elegist's encounter with the overtakelessness of the dead. What constitutes the 'I' is so slippery and multivalent that it has the potential to instil the autobiographical text with a deep unease – Riley notes 'the awkwardness stubbornly attached to using the first person' (2000: 59) – and to plunge the elegist into a state of insecurity about the stability of the self and its relation to the other:

How can I not reach where you are

And pull you back. How can I be
And you not. You're forever on the platform

Seeing the pattern of the train door closing.
Then the silver streak of me leaving.

What train was it? The number 6.
What day was it? Wednesday.

(2007: 24)

As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Bang's opening sentence in the above extract from 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' resonates with frustration at her inability to return the elegised to her proximity – that is, the proximity that might be engineered in the space of the page by a language and an 'I' that it is hoped will be able to capture the 'you' in his plenitude. The poem's opening rhetorical question is also suffused with retrospective regret that a separate 'I' – the mother who exists outside of the page – missed her opportunity to pull her son back from the actual crisis of his death. The sentence articulates a forward motion in order to then engineer the reverse movement of the dead – a pulling back towards the self, and ultimately a desired return to the fullness of presence, that recalls Orpheus's attempt to lead Eurydice back out of the Underworld.

The Introduction to this thesis notes that the 'you' that is Eurydice remains out of reach

because the poem can only give shape to its object by turning away from the dead or, to use Bang's earlier phrase, by acknowledging its 'terrible missing' of the elegised other. But the above extract from Bang's poem also plays out a particular crisis for the self: the poet's second rhetorical question, 'how can I be | And you not', communicates in an immediate sense the mother's guilt at outliving her son and her shock at confronting the void into which her child has disappeared. However, there is a deeper underlying resonance of scepticism on the poet's part that indicates a questioning of the capacity of the 'I' to remain stable and intact when it enters the space of the poem. How can the 'I' *be* – that is to say, how can the 'I' exist in a unified state and be fully possessed – when not only is it constituted in part by an unassimilable surplus, but it is also subject to temporal transmutation?

When the poet observes 'the silver streak of me leaving', she suggests that the self that is blurred in the speed of her departure – both on the train of that day and from the self that she *was* to the self that she *is* on the page – is also the shifting 'I', the identity of which as it reaches the poem is not the same as the 'I' that left on a 'number 6' train on that particular 'Wednesday'. Barthes remarks that 'the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday: the *I* of the discourse can no longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored' (1986: 17). What Bang is attempting in recreating 'a previously stored-up person' is an exhumation of her own previous self, the 'I' that stood 'on the platform' and then left on the train. In this context, when the speaker complains of her inability to 'reach where you are || And pull you back', the 'you' becomes not simply the elegised other, but also the self – the particular 'I' that existed at the time of the departure of the train.

For Bang, a desire to reach the 'you' in the above extract intimates her feeling of responsibility towards her son – to restore him as accurately to the page as she apparently restores to memory the number of the train and the day of their meeting. But there is also a latent desire to restore a part of her self that no longer exists – the mother of a living son. Max Cavitch observes that in the process of mourning 'we keep the dead inside ourselves, […] in tangles and hollows that figurative language can only strain to reach' (2007: 15), thus indicating the obstacles faced by Bang in attempting to restore the elegised other inside the body of her elegy by means of the vehicle of metaphor. However, it is also possible to locate in Cavitch's remark an inference of the

existence of not only a buried other within the self, but also a buried *self* within the self. In effect, the buried other and the buried self mingle in the space of the self and in the space of the poem as both struggle for articulation. In this light, Bang's question, 'how can I be | And you not' also points to her confusion at how an 'I' might survive when a 'you' has not, given that the two are so intertwined.

As if to try and restore a more stable identity to the 'I' in the above extract, the poet poses precise questions, with equally precise answers: 'What train was it? The number 6. | What day was it? Wednesday.' The effect of an apparent diary entry – whether recorded at the time of the departure of the train or for the first time years later in a poem – might communicate to the reader an enhanced authority, if only by means of the blunt assertiveness with which it is inserted into the poem. But it is as open to alteration, or simply diminished memory, as any other statement, and the absence of an independent witness – the 'you' cannot be pulled back to confer his own authority on the remark – means that memory remains as precarious as the 'I' that recalls it. In fact, the decisive tone of the answer to each question might betray precisely the feeling of underlying uncertainty that the narrator is attempting to conceal. The insecurity that lies at the foundations of Bang's first-person pronoun resonates with Riley's description of the detachment of the 'I' from the self:

> The falseness of my persona telling its tale resounds in my own ears despite my best attempt at accuracy, and however plausible it may sound to its audience. What purports to be 'I' speaks back to me, and I can't quite believe what I hear it say.
>
> (2000: 61)

The multiplicity of 'persona[s]' that constitute what is regarded as the self, with the resulting question-marks that hang over attempts at accuracy and plausibility, acquires a further level of uncertainty for a writer whose poetic persona inevitably becomes detached from the self that missed her son's death and failed to protect him from catastrophe. Bang's attempts even to give an accurate account of a particular day spent with her son – let alone accurately measure her emotion – are undercut by an 'I' that in its transition to the space of the poetic page may become even more distanced from the self than the 'I' that operated in the world before Bang's elegies came into being. Bang executes a poetic version of Riley's speaking back of the 'I' to the self when she answers her own questions with deliberate precision, but this apparent certainty is undermined

by uncertainty over the precise identity of the 'I' that is speaking, such that, as Riley puts it, 'I can't quite believe what I hear it say'.

In 'No Exit', Bang engages in feverish self-questioning that undermines both her hoped-for accuracy in her poetic account and the stability of the 'I' that relates this experience: 'Someone has spun me around, I don't know where || I'm going. What is today? Where am I?' (2007: 32). The multiple identities that are potentially incorporated within the 'I' are intimated in Bang's remark, 'I don't know where I'm going'; it is also possible to locate within this phrase an implied uncertainty about the consequences of a transition of the self from bereaved mother to elegist. How will the 'I' accommodate the transmutation of identity, and what will be lost of the self that is not only attempting to communicate an authentic measure of the emotion that she is feeling, but also to reach her dead son? In the opening poem in *Elegy*, 'A Sonata for Four Hands', Bang writes, 'I say Come Back and you do | Not do what I want' (2007: 3), implying a realisation that her newly registered persona of elegist – the 'I' of the poem – is as incapable of a successful retrieval and protection of her son as the 'I' that notionally defined her status as mother. Just as the mother failed to pull back her son from his actual death, so the elegist fails to acquire a measure of wished-for potency within the space of the poem.

Later in 'A Sonata for Four Hands', Bang explicitly detaches the 'I' from a notion of the unified self:

And my I sees.
Police seal peeled back. Everything
As you left it.

(2007: 4)

The word-play of 'my I sees' pictures a transition from the idealised maternal gaze, its all-seeing protective power – the eyes are 'peeled' for indications of danger and vulnerability – to the mother's newly acquired status of a written 'I', which 'sees', with all the uncertainty suggested by a poetic persona, 'everything | As you left it'. What is 'left' of the elegised other for the poet is what she can retrieve within the space of the page, and what remains in the elegy of a living mother is what the 'I' sees, so that protection of the son is transferred from the care and duty of the apparently stable maternal self to the shifting identities of the poetic persona.

The detachment of the 'I' from a particular conception of the self is implied in the above extract by an idea of the mother standing outside the space of the poem and seeing what her 'I' has become, so that what is 'peeled back' is not so much the hoped-for revelation of her son's presence, but rather a recognition of the absence of what she might regard as an authentic expression of the self. In fact, the more that Bang endeavours to reach an authentic self and release the emotion that she believes resides there, the more she is at risk of exposing the insecure foundations of the 'I'. Riley indicates the disjunction between what might be regarded as the authentic emotions of the self and their professed ownership within the space of the poem:

> My very self-description, even if it looks like my own confessional intimacy, has been sent to me by invitation. My entry merely delivers me to where I have been assigned. Indeed some new description may have seeped into me from the outside, by the time I've agreed with myself to register it as mine. I'm steeped in the world's words already, am well marinated. If there's an expectation that only my 'interiority' can bestow integrity on my self-portrayal, then in practice, this someone I painstakingly describe as me may resemble rather more of a Not-Me. My proffered self is always something of a dislocated 'I'.
>
> (2000: 33-34)

The definitions of a 'self-description' and a 'new description' have particular relevance for Bang in terms of how she defines the 'I' that is 'me'. Before her son was born, there was perhaps a part of the self that she could reasonably define as being other than the maternal. Following the appearance of her child, a 'new description' – that of 'mother' – was inevitably conferred on her; then, after her son's death, she is duly 'assigned' the status of *bereaved* mother. Each of these different incarnations of the self is to some extent 'sent to me by invitation' in the sense that no aspect of one's self is created purely by what could be termed 'interiority', since the self is constituted by a number of different external influences – we are all 'already […] well marinated', as Riley puts it. Consequently, the 'I' becomes 'dislocated' and loses a sense of what might be termed uniformity or singularity. Bang's work resonates with a recurring question for elegy of how a dislocated 'I' can possibly reach an other who has in turn been dislocated – moved from his position in the known world to an unfathomable place. What is at stake is as much a protection of the self – in its multiple incarnations – as it is a protection of the other. In what ways does Bang try to realise these aims in her poetry?

Bang's 'Unreal World'

The question of Bang's self-description following her son's death is raised not only by the content of her elegies – the instability and interchangeability of the first-person pronoun – but also by the very existence of the poems. In the writing of *Elegy*, does Bang's status change from mother to elegist, given that her new relationship with her son is reconfigured in a poetic rather than a maternal space? And does the description of 'mother' in any case fail to serve as an accurate description of a woman whose son has permanently disappeared? The idea of 'becoming a new social entity' (Riley 2000: 173) – in Bang's particular circumstances, being named a *bereaved* mother, and everything this name incorporates socially, emotionally, and linguistically – is potentially devastating, not least because it confirms the absence of the elegised other. This new social entity also holds within its name a loss of the part of the self that might be called 'mother' – a name that in itself buries a pre-maternal self that once existed outside the parameters of motherhood.

Bang's mutating status, and the repeated fracturing of the 'I' that this mutation enacts, represents a crisis for the self that subsequently lends an even greater precariousness to an attempted location of the elegised other. In these circumstances, what devices might an elegist employ to try and regain control of the chaotic scene of poetic mourning? According to Blanchot, 'the artist […] is said to protect himself from the world where action is difficult by establishing himself in an unreal world over which he reigns supreme' (1982: 52). Does Bang try to 'protect' herself from a 'difficult' world in which the fate of her son spiralled out of her control? And is her apparent attempt to regain a feeling of control in an 'unreal' poetic world motivated in part by her effort to loosen the ties of her newly assigned social entity of bereaved mother? When the poet appears to revisit her own childhood, there is an overwhelming sense of loss:

The warm day was caught
In a watch. And now the yellow car
Was passing near another corner she knew.
Time called her attention. There was
Someone like this before, she thought.

Upstanding, blank-faced, red-dressed.
Someone sitting in a box, defining herself
As one with roots. One burnished

By expandable light. One busied with examining
A nasty bruise.

(2007: 15)

This extract from 'What is so Frightening' is daubed with primary colours – 'yellow car' and 'red-dressed' add brightness and warmth to the fuzzy glow of a childhood memory. The 'she' of the poem is 'upstanding, blank-faced' in the manner of a canvas waiting to be painted; she is 'burnished | By expandable light', presenting the notion of an anticipated life full of promise and good fortune. But in the second stanza she places herself in 'a box', indicating that this particular self from the past is as difficult to reach as the elegised other – described, earlier in this chapter, as 'a box | Of ashes' (2007: 24). The speaker's attempt to save a previous incarnation of the self within the space of the poem and her attempt to preserve a previous incarnation of the elegised other coexist in the sentence, 'one busied with examining | A nasty bruise'. The sentence incorporates the self as both child and mother, engaged in the protection and care of her own child. However, the 'nasty bruise' undercuts the poet's own nostalgic memory, as she points to the emotional damage inflicted in the aftermath of her son's death.

Bang begins the above extract with the apparent intent of protecting a lost part of the self in order that she might renew her protection of a poetically reincarnated child. However, the nostalgic glow is discoloured by the blunt intrusion of a 'box' and a 'bruise', as the poet appears to mourn the loss of a pre-maternal self to the assigned status of mother, which in turn is subsumed under the status of bereaved mother. Riley observes that 'the business of being called something, and being positioned by that calling – that is, interpellation – is often an unhappy affair' (2000: 2), not least because such positioning is potentially restrictive and makes the location of a clearly defined, internally developed notion of the self infinitely more complex.[6] For Bang, the location of what she might perceive as an authentic self may allow her to locate and communicate an authentic display of emotion and to reach the elegised other. But to be 'positioned' as bereaved mother, in what is an external attribution of a name, appears to

[6] Interpellation is a term employed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) to describe the way in which a human subject is called, and therefore assigned a position in relation to ideology. It counteracts the notion of an independent, consistent human subject. According to Althusser: '[I]deology "acts" or "functions" in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals […], or "transforms" the individuals into subjects […] by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: "Hey, you there!"' (1971: 162-63).

show that for Bang a location of the self is as beyond her control as a location of the unfathomable other. Faced with this recognition of a loss of agency at precisely the moment when she is trying to engineer an encounter with an absent other, how might an elegist attempt to re-establish control of poetic mourning? And what are the risks inherent in the fashioning of what Blanchot terms, above, 'an unreal world' – beyond the existing artifice of the poem itself – for a poet who may want to escape the restrictive positioning of a disabling social category, but who also wants her poetry to facilitate an accurate measurement of her emotion?

In a discussion of her work, Bang admits that 'I want to disappear behind the speaker the way an actress or actor disappears behind the role they are playing'. In this way, she adds, 'I try to create a parallel world, which of course is what a stage is. So each of my poems is a stage and I stand on stage playing an actress who has a role in a play' (Guerra 2010). In engineering the disappearance of the self behind a poetic narrator, Bang suggests that a way for the elegist to bring her emotion, and the scene of mourning, under her control – so that she 'reigns supreme', as Blanchot puts it – is to 'create a parallel world'. It is, in effect, a landscape that does not entirely discard the components of her *lived* world, but that reframes the narrative so that *poetic* mourning becomes more manageable, and the notion of being 'an actress who has a role in a play' serves as a protective shield for the mourner:

So, the circus tent.
You, over there, you be the girl
In red sequins on the front of a card selling love.
You, over there, you, in black satin,
You be the Maiden's Mister Death.

(2007: 38)

In 'February Elegy', the sense of artifice already integral to the poem is reinforced by the assignment of roles, as if for a stage production, as the poet fashions her story as an encounter between 'the girl' and 'Mister Death'. The chosen setting of a 'circus tent' perhaps demonstrates Bang's desire to make death into a performance rather than a painful reality: the 'red sequins on the front of a card' are an attempt to add lustre to an unattractive tarot, stalked by the unattractive figure of Mister Death, who is nevertheless dressed in alluring 'black satin'. In an interview, Bang refers to *Elegy* as 'a book where there is no hiding', but then admits that 'even so, they are poems. And in poems one

hides […] behind the restraint of partial narrative'; she adds that 'I'm interested in narrative. Not personal narrative, but constructed narrative' (Kronovet 2008). Is the 'constructed narrative' a means for Bang to try to regain control over the story of her mourning, where death is allowed to hide behind sequins and satin? In 'No Exit', Bang's constructed narrative incorporates strands of fairytale that are freighted with both the restoration of security for the self and the preservation of her son in an imagined maternal embrace: 'The story is written, | Here is the kingdom – castle and castle' (2007: 32); and in 'Intractable, and Irreversible', '[t]he castle is quiet, the castle is snug' (2007: 52).

Bang's retreat into a constructed narrative affords the elegist the opportunity to soften the restrictive positioning of her attributed identity and cloak the elegised other in a vaguely framed fictional identity. McGuinness's observation of *For Anatole's Tomb* that within the space of his work Mallarmé enacts 'a movement away from external or concrete things into their abstract equivalents in the world of wishful imagination' (2003: 88) gives a clue to the development of Bang's own distancing device in 'Tragedy':

In yesterday's dream
We and others all
Wrapped ourselves in sheets
And went flying. Something

Like Peter Pan. Something
Like a child who will always be
A child.

(2007: 40-41)

In the parallel world that the poet constructs, the 'sheets' in which 'we wrapped ourselves' are transformed from an 'external' reality of a domestic site of grief and mourning to a wishfully constructed means of escape. Similarly, the painful reality of a lost child mutates in Bang's poem into 'something | Like a child who will always be | A child', which affords the elegised other a transition from external reality into the abstract territory of the elegy and enables his own liberation from the potential for restrictive positioning that might disable his mother. Further, the imagined incarnation of the child as 'something || Like Peter Pan' serves to note the smudged definition of 'yesterday's dream', while foregrounding the precise desire of the poet that her son should have eternal youth, at least within the constructed confines of the elegy.

The wishful preservation of her son as an approximation of Peter Pan is likely to be an image that Bang would far rather preserve than the much more immediate and horrifying concrete reality of her adult son plunged into a world of 'addiction catastrophe' (2007: 78).[7] In his discussion of the operation of subconscious thoughts and motives in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud observes that those people who find themselves in close proximity to personal discomfort or trauma, for instance 'relatives of the sick', may display a 'refusal to entertain unpleasant memories'. Further, this may develop into 'an *elementary resistance* to ideas that can arouse unpleasant ideas – a resistance comparable only to the flight reflex in reaction to painful stimuli' (2002: 139). In the above extract from Bang's poem 'Tragedy', Freud's 'flight reflex' mutates into a dreamlike 'flying' that projects her, and her child, into a fantasy world where unpleasant ideas and an unassimilable other are brought more within the control of the elegist.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I noted the inherent obstacles to a study of elegy presented by a largely psychoanalytic approach to mourning. Nevertheless, there are moments in Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' that serve to illuminate particular psychic strands of the contemporary elegy. Freud's model of normal mourning on the one hand, and pathological melancholia on the other, notes that in the case of the latter, the 'demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments' to the dead is met with 'opposition […] so intense that a turning away from reality takes place' (1984b: 253). Freud's remark resonates with Blanchot's observation, also discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, that Orpheus's action of 'turning away' from Eurydice (1982: 171) is in terms of the poem an artificial representation that cannot approach the reality of who the elegised *was* – a corporeal presence – and who the elegised *is* – an incomprehensible absence. Therefore, it appears that Bang's fashioning of an unreal word is a turning away that is exercised within the framework of what is in itself, as a work of artifice, an unavoidable turning away from the elegised other.

Does Bang's poetic retreat to the realms of fantasy and fairytale represent an attempt on the elegist's part to turn away not only from the reality of her son's death, but also from the subsequent unpalatable reality of her son's newly found overtakelessness? What might be described as Bang's turning away from reality is constituted at least in part by

[7] 'Let's Go Back'.

her apparent reluctance to allow her son to emerge into his own reality as a mature adult, as if that might release him from her protective poetic custody. Instead, it appears that *Elegy*, like Peter Pan, is specifically constructed as an imaginary space where her son 'will always be | A child', in the words of 'Tragedy', above. In 'Curtains of Emptiness', the poet reveals that '[s]he dreamed him || At every age. Ten and less', and later in the same poem, there is '[t]he skating scene seen again | And again, against the replay of a fever at four' (2007: 71). The homophones 'scene' and 'seen' enact a repetition that is continued by the repeated 'again' appearing a third time in the word '*again*st' (my emphasis), so that the idea of a 'replay' develops and mutates as the poet's line unspools on the page. Bang implies that the poetic mourner's language instinctively returns again and again to specific memories of the dead to the point where the fact of repetition begins to supplant the actual details of the recollection in the mourner's mind. Sandra M. Gilbert writes:

> The trauma of […] concrete encounters with mortality is so intense that the mind of the mourner tends to seek stability in recollections of things past, telling the tale of experience with the lost one over and over, as if to guarantee its reality.
>
> (2007: 429)

To develop Gilbert's argument, what is in one sense a turning *away* from the reality of the present can also be construed as a turning *towards* the reality of the past – a reality for Bang, the recently bereaved mother, that appears to offer more comfort than the distressing fact of her son's death. However, the promised 'stability in recollections of things past' is undermined by the instability of language as words appear and then reappear in different configurations in the above extract from 'Curtains of Emptiness'. Further, the 'reality' of the lost experience of the skating scene, above, is made increasingly fragile by the very fact of its repeated recollection as memory fades and events blur and mutate in a similar manner to the language that attempts to describe them.

Bang's attempted preservation of the other in the aspic of fixed moments from the past intermingles with a desire for self-preservation. She writes in 'You Were You Are Elegy' that '[t]rue beauty is truly seldom. | You were', and later in the same poem, '[y]ou are | The brightest thing in the shop window' (2007: 84-85). Here, Bang appears to display a tendency towards what Freud identifies in his 1914 essay 'On Narcissism: An

Introduction' as a re-emergence of the 'affectionate' parent's 'own narcissism', whereby they are compelled 'to ascribe every perfection to the child – which sober observation would find no occasion to do – and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings' (1984c: 84-85). Such a trait, Freud remarks, acquires particular relevance for the mother since '[i]n the child which they bear, a part of their own body confronts them like an extraneous object, to which, starting out from their narcissism, they can then give complete object-love' (1984c: 83). In this light, Bang confronts an elegised other whose unavoidable alterity is constituted by fragments of the self, therefore acting as confirmation to the elegist that her protection of the other is contingent on her protection of the self.

When Bang writes in 'Guilt' of 'him' that he is 'perched in her mind, | Never to be unbalanced again' (2007: 72), there is an idea that an internalised, stable other will contribute to the restoration of a stable self, 'never to be unbalanced again', and vice versa. The stasis of the son also indicates his transition from the dangers of an external, physical reality to the more controlled environs of an imagined presence in a fictive world. At one time he existed in the mother's body, now he exists only in her mind, in 'a state of loose coherence || In the theater of the skull' (2007: 29),[8] or he announces his presence in 'the mind's continual muffled | Increment of tickytickytick' (2007: 74).[9] Bang's son has moved from the external to the internal, a transition noted by Derrida in his memorial essay for Louis Marin – discussed in Chapter 1 – when he observes that mourning involves a process of 'interiorization', in which the dead 'can no longer be but *in us*' (2001: 159).

For Bang, the 'interiorization' of her son has the potential to be simultaneously a comfort – in her mind, he will never be unbalanced again – and a source of deep distress. The movement of the elegised from external reality to internal imagination comes with what Derrida calls the 'terrifying and chilling' realisation that '[h]e is no more, he whom we see in images or in recollection, he of whom we speak, whom we cite, whom we try to let speak' (2001: 159-60). Reflecting the transition of her son from one mode of being to another, Bang writes in 'Curtains of Emptiness' that as soon as he 'was done for […] her mind ticked | With his still presence' (2007: 71). This is where he is

[8] 'She Remembers His Hat'.

[9] 'She Remembered'.

'still' – that is, he continues to live in her mind – but he is also 'still', as in *static*, and not a fleshed-out, corporeal presence that she can touch. He was before his death, as noted earlier in this chapter, a 'boy made of bone and blood' (2007: 24), but now he exists only in '[m]y stoppered mind' (2007: 9),[10] an enclosed space in which the elegist can fashion her own version of reality: 'The […] thing | He was not was dead' (2007: 79).[11] In its most immediate sense, this last declaration indicates the contrast between a past and a present reality – from 'not […] dead' to dead. But Bang also appears to show the mutation of death from physical event – the death and disintegration of bone and blood – to an intangible concept that is constituted by the presence of absence. Blanchot observes:

> Just as each thing must become invisible, likewise what makes death a thing, the brute fact of death, must become invisible. Death enters into its own invisibility, passes from its […] terrifying reality to its ravishing unreality. […] Through this conversion it is the ungraspable, the invisible.
>
> (1982: 147)

In his observation of the mutation of death from 'brute fact' to 'invisibility', Blanchot touches on the elegist's encounter with the overtakelessness of the dead. Death is perhaps most present in the moment of its unique event – the expiry of the corporeal body before its disappearance from sight. What is left for the poetic mourner after the 'terrifying reality' – regardless of whether this has been personally experienced – is a 'ravishing unreality' that captures both the irresistible allure of the dead and a subsequent recognition of their unassimilable nature. The dead are 'ungraspable' in their non-existence – that is, they are intangible and incomprehensible – and they elude the poet's efforts to reach and recall them through language, which has the potential effect of simply increasing the elegist's entrancement. In the opening stanza of 'Where Once', there is a noticeable tension between Bang's cartoonish depiction of the elegised and the underlying frustration that inhabits her metaphor:

On the street, looking up, there you were.
A single helium balloon, imagine
A flat-face mouse in Mylar.

(2007: 66)

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[10] 'No More'.

[11] 'One Thing'.

Here, Bang's 'ravishing unreality' is constituted by an imagined space where the 'you' is 'a single helium balloon, […]| A flat-face mouse in Mylar', so that death becomes as invisible as the gas that fills the 'helium balloon'. However, her son, too, is to all intents and purposes invisible, refashioned into a comical object, whose face is sealed in Mylar, a type of polyester film. The distance between Bang and her son is depicted literally as the speaker observes him in the air – 'on the street, looking up, there you were' – and metaphorically: the formerly three-dimensional adult is transformed into a flat-face mouse. In an imagined turning of the gaze towards the elegised other, the poet confirms the reality of her constructed unreality – that her averted poetic gaze fails to capture her son as he floats away.

What is at stake for Bang in her turning away from the elegised other? Does the fulfilment of her desire to reach her son, in poetry that might also accurately measure her raw grief, depend precisely on an authentic demonstration of closeness – even with the knowledge that any portrayal of attachment will be contained within a space of artifice? Spargo notes that 'the elegy must work hard to maintain a claim of intimacy, for the (sometimes fictive) remembrance of intimacy provides assurance that the other was and remains knowable' (2004: 129). The notion of such a provision of 'assurance' is important for an elegist whose guilt at missing her son's death suffuses the pages of her work. But Spargo's observation also suggests the arrival at the scene of elegy of the reader, whose expectations of a book hewn from personal tragedy may harbour their own desire for a particular level of intimacy. How 'knowable' is Bang's son from the evidence contained within *Elegy*, and what does that say about the level of intimacy that is communicated by Bang's poetry? As if troubled by such probing, in 'Guilt' the poet re-runs the questions that are pertinent to the writing of her book:

Would it ever go away?
Married to the inexhaustible
Need to be accurate,
Were twenty little questions like,

Is this who he was? Who
Wants to know?

(2007: 72)

In the word 'accurate', Bang locates both an observation of her own desire for a

measurement of her emotion and an anxious glance towards a perceived external pressure for accuracy, given the autobiographical background of her book. Spargo observes that '[p]erhaps no assumption looms larger in the history of grief […] than the idea that there is a privileged space granted to familial or intimate relation' (2004: 129). However, the price that may be exacted by this privilege is a raised expectation from the neutral observer that prompts Bang's apparently prickly questioning in the final two lines of the above extract. There is perhaps a sense of the poet becoming aware of an externally motivated need to do justice to her relationship with her son. What does it mean for an elegist to be accountable to the reader's demand when she is dealing with private loss? And how can language bear the extra pressure of such accountability, when it is already struggling to carry the weight of an encounter with overtakelessness and a measurement of the elegist's emotion?

The Reader's Demand

Bang admits, above, 'the inexhaustible | Need to be accurate', an internally motivated requirement that the poet notes when she reflects on the failure of her words to accurately measure her emotion. But what of the invisible reader, who is perhaps not so present when Bang begins writing immediately after her son's death – as noted in the Introduction to this chapter, Bang's elegies were not originally intended for publication – but may loom into view when *Elegy* moves from a private space and into a public arena? Given the intimate relation that sits at the heart of Bang's book, what might a reader demand from a story of personal grief? In his review of *Elegy*, David Orr writes:

> When pain is primitive and specific, as it is after the death of a loved one, then we don't want an exquisite performance filled with grand abstractions. What we want is to go beyond art, beyond society and beyond speech itself.
>
> (2008)

Orr notes what appear to be the reader's unreasonable expectations, which in their desire for poetry that goes 'beyond art, beyond society and beyond speech itself', resonate with the elegist's confounded longing for language that encompasses the beyondness of the elegised other. Furthermore, because raw grief inhabits a space that frequently escapes the grasp of language, how can an elegist be expected to express 'primitive pain' in such a manner that satisfies an audience of critical observers? Given

that Bang is writing from an experience of personal loss, will the reader harbour a desire for a compellingly authentic – however that may be defined – and emotionally charged account? Does Bang risk disappointing the reader who, afforded knowledge of the event that gave rise to the writing of *Elegy*, might expect a graphic display of grief? It is possible that a proportion of the readership of Bang's elegies will have what Luc Boltanski terms 'a selfish way of looking which is wholly taken up with the internal states aroused by the spectacle of suffering: fascination, horror, interest, excitement, pleasure' (1999: 21).[12] This reader may demand from *Elegy* a satisfying emotional jolt, rather like the thrill that might be experienced by watching a horror film, that is to say, a compelling spectacle that presents no immediate risk of suffering to the spectator concerned. If Bang's writing is interpreted by the reader as being not at a particular emotional level – that it does not measure up to expectation in its measurement of emotion – then will it be considered that her elegies are as inadequate as the ash that constitutes her son?

Clearly, it is within the reach of many writers to construct a fiction about death and mourning, but given the biographical revelation that Bang has actually experienced the death of her son, then will there be an added presumption on the reader's part that her experience of loss will be more tangible and that this tangibility should be pressingly evident? This is not to argue that those who immerse themselves in Bang's elegies might simply demand a deluge of explicit emotion, in whatever way that might be realistically achieved in lyric poetry. Rather, a more sophisticated response from the reader to the elegy can incorporate an unspoken demand that an *accurate* measurement of emotion is precisely that – that it should go so far as to be felt authentically by the reader, but not so far that the emotion becomes over-exposed. Unfortunately, in the very act of writing, any poet might ultimately confront the unpalatable realisation that 'literature […] cannot prove not only *what* it says but even *that* it is worth the trouble of saying it' (Barthes 1986: 372). Specifically with regard to poetic mourning, the dead cannot disprove or deny what appears on the page, but, regardless of this fact, what are the potential effects on an elegist who might perceive that her words are not 'worth […] saying'?

[12] In his work *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, Boltanski discusses the relationship between an observer and a distant sufferer in terms of a presentation of suffering through the media, but his observations can be usefully applied to potential tensions – and expectations – that arise in the relationship between the elegist and the reader.

It is possible that the elegist will experience a persistent fear that she will eventually become tiresome and that interest in her account of mourning might wane. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Freud remarks on the general response to mourning that '[w]e rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time' (1984b: 252), and this perceived external pressure might also be brought to bear on the elegist – particularly when societal demands dictate that open expressions of grief should be subject to severe restrictions. In 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', Bang expresses a particular hope about the day that she and her son spent together in a gallery, and the train in which she departed afterwards:

That car should be forever sealed in amber.
That dolorous day should be forever

Embedded in amber.
In garnet. In amber. In opal. In order

To keep going on.

(2007: 24)

There are obvious implications of preserving a memory 'in amber' in order to retain its original and accurate components so that the memory does not die and life can 'keep going on' in the face of mortality. But it is also noticeable that Bang's word 'amber' also keeps 'going on': it appears at three points in the above extract, indicating the poet's desire to emphasise the importance of her sentiment and to try and assure herself that her son's memory will be preserved. But is she also aware of the potential hazard of repetition so that amber loses its lustre? And does she betray her self-consciousness about going over the same ground so often?

Freud identifies the mental processes involved in both mourning and melancholia, whereby 'first one and then another memory is activated', leading to 'laments which always sound the same and are wearisome in their monotony' (1984b: 265-66). In Bang's lines, above, there is a perceptible strand of self-criticism that implies the poet should simply cease writing and stop 'going on' about it, or at least place restrictions on the account of her grief in order to avoid such 'wearisome […] monotony', as Freud terms it. The more often the phrase 'going on' reappears in *Elegy*, the more it seems that Bang is contemplating, alongside the interminable sense of loss, her own fear of failure to achieve what might be perceived as an externally determined level of emotional

expression. Elsewhere in *Elegy*, the concluding line of 'No Exit' observes '[a] tragic flawed fate going on and on and on' (2007: 33); 'Intractable, and Irreversible' signs out with, '[a] dream bell begins to toll, to tell | Of the intolerable end that keeps going on' (2007: 52); and the final sentence of 'A Boy at Play is an Actor in a Tragedy' intimates that a state of inertia will descend on the elegist and the elegised if the period of mourning is over-extended:

> Here we are,
> She said to the box next to her desk,
> And here we will be, on-and-on-
> Living in the realm of simultaneity.

(2007: 57)

Is it possible, given her repetition of a particular phrase, that Bang is consciously anticipating the reader's potential demands of her poetic account? It is on this point that Boltanski is illustrative when he develops his account of the relationship between the 'spectator' and the 'suffering unfortunate':

> If the spectator imagines the sensations of the suffering unfortunate, the unfortunate also imagines the spectator's sensations imagining his, the unfortunate's, sensations. […] The spectator imagines the suffering of the unfortunate, but he is not the one suffering. The suffering is therefore represented in an abated form in his imagination. But the unfortunate anticipates, in imagination, the abated form in which the spectator imagines his suffering. He therefore abates its expression so as not to exceed the possibilities of the spectator's attention and so as not to exhaust his patience.
>
> (1999: 39)[13]

Boltanski's argument presents a two-way process between 'spectator' and 'unfortunate' in which, first, the observer does not feel the full force of the emotions of the sufferer, thus prompting a dilution by the perceptive sufferer of his 'sensations' so as not to make his account exasperating. If the elegist, 'the unfortunate', experiences some sensitivity to the reactions of her reader, or 'spectator', then it is feasible that she might make her elegies less graphic in their account of 'suffering' (or predict their capacity to irritate) in

[13] Boltanski builds on the idea of the spectator in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: 'As they [the spectators] are continually placing themselves in his [the sufferer's] situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it. As they are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is as constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation' (Smith 1976: 22).

order not to lose the reader's 'attention' (or worse, cause the reader to discard the book).

Bang might have one eye on the attendant expectations of the reader when she writes in 'Untitled' of 'a mass of open eyes, | Waiting for the awful eventual' (2007: 55). The 'awful eventual' may be an anticipation of catastrophe that Bang failed to bring to mind before her son's death. But considering the juxtaposition of these words with 'a mass of open eyes', there is an indication that the poet is directing her gaze beyond the confines of personal tragedy and onto the spectator of the elegy. There is a tension between the demands of a poetic encounter with overtakelessness and a fear of over-extending her language: if she is too heavy-handed in her account of personal grief as she tries to reach her son, then the 'awful eventual' may assume the form of a reader who is suspicious about the authenticity of her work. In 'What is so Frightening', the speaker remarks that what inspires fear is 'pathos. | Its mean little whip of pity'. It is, she continues, '[t]he force filled | With persistence demanding dominance' (2007: 15). For Bang, her fear of 'pathos' is perhaps twofold: its 'persistence' may eventually consume her and in turn consume her poetry, making her own language as unreachable as the elegised other. Second, pathos may assert its 'dominance' over the language to such an extent that it exhausts the reserves of pity held by a disaffected reader.

There is a parallel to be drawn between the ways that an elegy may distance itself from its reader and Boltanski's observations of the media reporting of suffering, in the sense that both events are characterised by the absence of the spectator at the scene of suffering. Boltanski remarks that 'the authenticity of the suffering endured by the unfortunate' can only be satisfactorily determined by the spectator where '[e]motion […] is understood as an *externalisation of the interior*. What is inside, that is to say real, *manifests* its *presence* in the exterior' (1999: 82). In this sense, the manifestation of presence that is so desired by the elegist (of the elegised other) might also be desired by the reader – that is to say, the presence of the poet herself. However, just as the elegist is forced to look inside the self to find what remains of the dead, so any judgement about '*externalisation of the interior*' becomes dependent on the reader's imagination rather than tangible evidence. Since the reader is generally not brought face-to-face with the elegist, an event that might allow the interpretation of physical signs to determine authenticity, then it is potentially more difficult for the reader to be satisfied that the emotions that Bang is communicating are genuine. The reader may suspect manipulation and might

decide that the elegist is exploiting the advantage of such distance to invoke the reader's own emotion.

In a further mode of separation experienced by the suffering unfortunate and the spectator, 'the spectator is sheltered. He is not in the same situation as the unfortunate; he is not by his side during his agony or torture' (Boltanski 1999: 153). One potential consequence for the spectator of being at this remove is to deepen what Boltanski calls the sense of 'uncertainty' that 'questions the validity of a sensitization which plays on the spectator's *emotions*' (1999: 179). Whatever Bang's conscious or subconscious intentions regarding her interaction with the reader and the measurement of her emotion, there is a lessening of the intensity of emotion as it passes first through the elegist, then to the page, and finally to the reader. At this point, the sceptical reader may try and determine to what extent the elegist is 'disclosing an intention to move', which is likely to be identified as unsuccessful: 'Representation designed to move fails in its aim because emotion is anticipated by the "visible strings" fixing it to the images, sounds and words in the way a property is attached to a product' (Boltanski 1999: 83). Given this potential anticipation by the reader of '"visible strings"' via 'images, sounds and words', how might an elegist work formally with her emotion within the constraints of lyric poetry, so that the non-verbal components of her poetry are instrumental in articulating the grief that is invoked in response to the death and subsequent overtakelessness of the other?

Formal Strategies

David Orr notes, above, that a possible demand of the elegy written from experience of personal loss is that it 'go […] beyond speech itself', which would present a particularly problematic task for the poems in *Elegy*. Bang's work appears to lack the potential of Howe's more experimental, and visually expansive, textual collages for non-verbal communication – a visual and sonic, rather than a merely linguistic, approach to poetic mourning. Bang's regular free-verse stanzas appear to demonstrate a more contained and restrictive approach to territory that is inherently unfathomable and out of reach. Nevertheless, there are formal strategies that Bang uses in an effort both to circumvent the inherent limitations of language and to enhance the effect of the verbal constructions in her poetry. In an interview, Bang reflects on the obstacles to communicating grief by means of poetry, but claims that '[y]ou can capture it in […]

torqued syntax' (Benson 2008). In 'No More', a single sentence spans three separate stanzas:

Rumination is and won't stop
With the stoppered bottle, the pills
On the floor, the broken plate
On the floor, the sleeping face

In the bassinette of your birth month,
The dog bite, the difficulty,
The stairwell of a three-flat
Of your sixth year, the flood

Of farthering off this all takes you
As thought and object become
What you are.

(2007: 8-9)

The accumulation of emotion and memory in the mind of the speaker is suggested by the frantic syntax, which propels the reader from item to item and between 'thought and object'. The opening observation that 'rumination […] won't stop' is reinforced by the absence of a full stop: the single sentence itself doesn't end until line 11 of the above extract. The positioning of the word 'flood' as a temporary terminus at the end of line 8, after the accumulation of apparently random detail and before a stanza break, suggests both the nature of the flood – the elusive non-verbal articulation of grief is represented by white space – and the compelling presence of the emotion, which enforces a pause in thought. It is an intake of breath that separates an awkward construction: 'the flood || Of farthering off this all takes you', which in turn pushes 'you' to the end of the line so that the elegised is made simultaneously prominent and distant, placed in a perilous position in the poem. The dreadful and repetitive circularity of mourning – with its accompanying miscellany of poignant detail – is visualised by the distance on the page between the opening and closing phrases of the lengthy sentence: 'what you are', implies Bang, is a 'rumination' that 'won't stop'. Further, what you are ultimately, indicates Bang, is a full stop – the poet implies that her son is the point to which every sentence leads, and the point at which every sentence founders.

Bang's use of the line break is a key component in her effort to convey the emotion that is an inextricable part of the mourning process. She remarks in an interview that 'I think of the break as a place where something comes to an end before it goes on again on the

next line' (Kronovet 2008). In light of Bang's remark, it is worth noting in the above extract the position of the phrase 'the sleeping face', which appears at the end of a stanza – with its context of 'the broken plate' and 'the pills' – that might allude to the immediate scene of her son's death. But the enjambed phrase is completed in the first line of the following stanza by 'in the bassinette of your birth month', indicating the speaker's sharp switch in thought from death to life; it might be said that the life of the elegised 'comes to an end' at the conclusion of one passage of thought 'before it goes on again' at the beginning of the next stanza. There is a broader inference to be made here about mourning itself, which does not generally write a linear narrative, but rather repeatedly breaks and reconstitutes itself in apparently random and unexpected fashion.

In the same interview with Kronovet, Bang's observation of the particular effects of 'the broken line' leads her to a discussion of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose 'strange and continual enjambment', Bang remarks, 'creates the sense of an almost manic push of speech that indicates a degree of intensity over and above what poetry usually reveals'.[14] Such 'intensity', Bang adds, 'tells us something about a state of mind without using direct speech' (Kronovet 2008). In 'Enclosure', what is revealed by the broken line between the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second stanza is a state of frustration and disappointment:

Who knew that a police seal was blue,
That a morgue door could have metal deco trim
Around its rectangular invitation
To come in have a seat and complete this

Form.

(2007: 21)

The idea of a wholly successful retrieval of the dead – the chance to 'complete' what is essentially incomplete – is left in suspension at the end of the penultimate line of the above extract, before descending into anti-climax in the first word of the following stanza. The inevitable and disappointing bureaucracy of death – the bathos of which is heightened by the initial capital of 'Form' and its isolation from the preceding detail of the sentence – destroys any notion of the singularity of the elegised. The speaker's

[14] Bang takes as her example Hopkins's poem 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', in *A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (OUP: 1986), p. 175.

experience of death, too, is reduced to the collective, and very banal, form-filling that is required by the authorities, which are engaged in ensuring the anonymity of death – the absorption of the elegised into the general experience, and his confinement to factual detail. The stanza break in 'complete this || Form' also enables Bang to highlight and reflect on her own breaking of conventional poetic form as she attempts to convey her emotional upheaval by means of the uncomfortable line ending. It is also worth noting, in 'Intractable, and Irreversible', another distinctive stanza break, where the non-verbal effect of white space adds expressive potency to the verbal content, and notions of security are broken by the enjambed line:

At home in his ash box, he was going nowhere

Else.

(2007: 51)

Bang remarks that the line break can be used '[t]o replicate the mind in the act of grappling with language' (Kronovet 2008), implying that at least part of the emotion that Bang wishes to measure in her poetry is invoked precisely by the strenuous efforts of the poem to reach the elegised other:

Disappointment. And again The End gate
Opens and it's, Please
Come back. Please Be. Then nothing. Only end-

Less night taking off from the smooth tarmac slate.

(2007: 12)

Successive end points of 'Please' and 'end-' in line 2 and line 3 of the above extract from 'The Cruel Wheel Turns Twice' fashion the phrase, 'please end', perhaps betraying the speaker's desire for release from the elegy and its battle with the limits of language, even as she initiates another verbal construction. The broken word 'end- || Less' poses questions about the irremediable fragmentation of expression as the hyphen in line 3 searches for its lost component, but points in the opposite direction, lost in white space; the initial capital of 'Less', a word that stands alone following the stanza break, appears to confirm the estrangedness of language as newly formed discrete words assert their autonomy from one another and from the writer herself.

In ‘No Exit’, Bang depicts by means of her line-endings the dissonance between expectation and realisation:

Someone once told her that spring meant green

Was on the stem of every flower.
This was the springless January of his beginning
To be gone forever.

(2007: 32)

Successive notes of optimism in the words ‘green’, ‘flower’, and ‘beginning’ are shattered by the final revelation, where the full stop that immediately follows ‘forever’ communicates a recognition that the disappearance of the dead is permanent. In ‘No More’, Bang attempts to articulate the inarticulable with abrupt punctuation: ‘Hello to the empty present and.’ (2007: 8), and she concludes ‘The Role of Elegy’ with the line, ‘[o]ne hears repeatedly, the role of elegy is.’ (2007: 64). As noted above, Bang ‘repeatedly’ returns to the page in the months following her son’s death; however, each successive elegy continues to confront the uncompromising reality of her son’s absence.

Perhaps Bang’s line from ‘The Role of Elegy’ articulates the notion that the role of elegy is to contemplate the depth of white space that presses against its boundaries – a feature of the page that is, according to Glyn Maxwell, ‘[t]he other half of everything’ for poets (2012: 13). Furthermore, Maxwell observes that the interaction of white space with words is crucial to the dynamic of the poem: ‘Poets work with two materials, one’s black and one’s white. Call them sound and silence, life and death, […] love and loss’ (2012: 11). What might this comment have to say about Bang’s elegies and in particular her juxtaposition of the verbal and the non-verbal? Consider the following fragment from ‘Visiting’, the final poem in *Elegy*:

We loved this:
Dark city and its boxy art
Of living.

(2007: 88)

The colon following ‘this’ indicates in its most immediate sense that what ‘[w]e loved’ was the ‘city’, where one might find what Maxwell terms ‘sound’ and ‘life’ inhabiting Bang’s ‘dark’ urban space. But Bang’s broken line locates love as a preliminary to ‘this’

– that is, the white space that follows the colon; one might say, therefore, that the 'silence', 'death' and 'loss' that Maxwell claims are constituted by the whiteness of the page are separated from love by the porous barrier that is the colon. In one sense, this suggests the fragility of life, but also, in a more pressing sense for Bang, the susceptibility of language to dissolution in the face of the nothingness of death and the raw substance of personal grief.

Conclusion

In an interview, Bang recollects a particular stage in her poetic development, before the event that led to *Elegy*, when she 'began to see that one could invent new solutions for the problems a poem presents', and that this led her 'to experiment with using indirection, instead of direction. […] Disjunction instead of a direct linear approach' (Kronovet 2008). The problem that she sets herself at the outset of *Elegy*, as discussed in the Introduction to this chapter, 'to give shape to a state of disbelief and horror and regret and a terrible missing' is only partially solved by the types of formal 'disjunction' that I have detailed in the previous section. Ultimately, language is Bang's principal tool, but it fails to comply with her demand that it measure her emotion:

> The missing is married
> To drizzle. Of course, tears
> Are only one aspect
> Of the scenery of sorrow. The language
>
> Of ancestors, mourning the departure
> Of any or many.
>
> (2007: 22)

In 'Enclosure', the language of raw grief is as hazy and hard to pinpoint as a particular feature of a landscape in 'drizzle'; the outward expression of 'tears' is only one of a whole panoply of expressions of emotion that make up the hidden 'scenery of sorrow'. Bang is also conscious – as many elegists have been before her – of the fact that the language of 'mourning' is as ancient as mourning itself. The hope of retaining a notion of singularity for the elegised – and of lessening the effects of his newly found overtakelessness – is somewhat dashed by Bang's realisation that her own well-worn words have just as much capacity as death to make her son invisible.

As the final poem in *Elegy*, does 'Visiting' carry an added freight of anxiety about how to conclude? How does the poet end a book that is prompted by the ending of a life? In an essay entitled 'Dynamic Design: The Structure of Books of Poems', Natasha Sajé engages in 'a discussion of endings' and advances the view that 'the last poem in a book underscores its meaning emphatically. […] Whatever tone it adopts, the last poem must conclude' (2005: 154). What clues to the 'meaning' of *Elegy* can be gleaned from Bang's final poem?

> You whose name is you
> Are a fantasy that remains
>
> After I wake from a dream of walking
> Shoeless in snow.
>
> (2007: 88)

In the above extract from 'Visiting', perhaps the son, the 'you whose name is you' in the space of *Elegy*, becomes an inextricable part of 'a fantasy that remains'. He is artistically immortalised in a book that situates him in fairytale and dream, but that also to some extent notes his overtakelessness by making him into a 'fantasy', embalmed in memories of childhood that circumvent the reality of his adult presence. Alternatively, the 'you' might be Bang herself, whose identity has also been somewhat eroded by being named mother, and then bereaved mother, to the point where her 'name' – as signifier of individuality – has also become mere fantasy.

When Bang observes in 'Visiting' that there will be 'no more speaking | Out loud' (2007: 88), it serves as notice that her book is almost over, that the elegies will soon be as silent as their subject. But Bang's lines also act as a potent reminder that written language cannot fulfil the desire of the mourner who wants to howl and scream; words fail to satisfy the poet's demand that they should articulate raw grief. When mourning is reduced to the written word, it loses its sound and its shape; one might say that it loses its quality of being fully alive. What the elegist is left with is '[o]nly the excavation || And finding the old' (2007: 88), the depressing recurrence of the exhausted language of mourning. As for the elegised, his 'ragged crown […] is a trinket buried | In curb debris' (2007: 88-89), suggesting that Bang's language might have merely served to obscure what it originally intended to uncover.

There is, at the end of 'Visiting', a farewell:

Goodnight. The ordeal comes
To its periodic end

Which simply means
The ahead is again.

(2007: 89)

What lies 'ahead' in an immediate sense for Bang is the contemplation of the full stop, the 'periodic end' that punctuates each passage of poetic mourning. As noted in the Introduction to this chapter, according to Bang, 'the page becomes a space where a conversation continues. The beloved stays in the world for the duration of the writing' (Kronovet 2008). What lies beyond the writing of *Elegy* for Bang is contemplation of the everyday fact of 'is', the present – what she describes in 'January Elegy' as 'the indefatigable now' (2007: 31), a place where 'the beloved' no longer exists. In a discussion of her work, Bang remarks that '[i]n the moment of writing, elegy takes one out of the deep end of sorrow' (Kronovet 2008), suggesting that the price exacted by elegy for its temporary amelioration of grief is a failure to measure the depth of the emotion that lies beneath the surface – of the poet herself and the language that she uses to try and recover the elegised other.

If, as Bang discovers, the elegised inhabits a space that evades the reach of language, then is it possible for the elegist to look beyond words in her efforts to negotiate an encounter with the unassimilable dead? In the next chapter, I consider the ways in which a photocopied scrapbook, enclosed in a box, foregrounds the role of the material object in an attempted pursuit of the elegised and throws overtakelessness into sharp relief. How does the translation of personal relics – in conjunction with textual matter – to an elegiac space redefine the relationship between the elegist and her subject?

Chapter 3

De-translating the Dead: Materiality and Muteness in Anne Carson's *Nox*

Introduction

In Chapter 2, there is a point in Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy* where the poet appears to give shape to her disbelief and horror at the sudden death of her son when she reveals 'the hair-tearing || Grief of the mother' (2007: 60). However, grief is lost as soon as it becomes word rather than emotion, and Bang's linguistic observation of 'the mother' empties the self of identity even as it connects with a notion of the maternal body. Furthermore, her use of the definite article 'the', rather than the possessive 'my', to describe 'grief' indicates that the language of raw emotion is as out of reach for the elegist as the object of her mourning, whom she addresses directly in order to voice her frustration: 'How can I not reach where you are || And pull you back' (2007: 24).

Bang's confounded poetic attempt to access her son's newly found, and unfathomable, territory – 'where you are' – recalls Susan Howe's observation in Chapter 1 that her archival explorations for the dead might simply be 'a search for a precursive relation always beyond us' (Thompson 2005). Howe appears to reinforce Bang's observation of an unbridgeable distance between the living and the dead – a concept of beyondness that both lures the elegist forward and demonstrates the impossibility of pulling back the elegised other. Bang is enticed to recall her son to the page in order to continue an imagined conversation, but he remains outside the range of a corporeal and linguistic recovery. If the elegised inhabits a space that eludes the reach of language, then is it possible for the elegist to look beyond words in her efforts to negotiate an encounter with the dead?

In this chapter I will examine a text that, like Bang's *Elegy*, is brought into being by an event of personal loss, but which takes a radically different approach – stylistically, linguistically and emotionally – to the elegised and the notion of poetic mourning. In *Nox* (2010), a reproduced scrapbook on a single, concertinaed length of paper enclosed

in a cardboard box, Anne Carson[1] presents an elegy for her brother Michael, who according to Carson 'ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail',[2] and died unexpectedly twenty-two years later in Copenhagen. In *Nox*, textual material – principally, small sections of Carson's own writing on scraps of paper – is interspersed with reproduced fragments of material objects, such as a letter, family photographs, postage stamps, rough sketches and doodles, and collages. Much of this verbal and visual material is faced on the left-hand side of the folded page by an extended, and apparently personalised, translation of each individual word from Catullus's poem 101, also written in memory of a dead brother.[3]

Whereas Bang's *Elegy* is suffused with her linguistic attempts to articulate, and accurately measure, the emotion that follows the death of her son, Carson approaches her brother in much more reticent fashion, implying from the outset of *Nox* that she has recognised the disjunction between her desire 'to fill my elegy with light of all kinds' and the reality of loss because 'death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it'. Carson's implied contrast between the desired 'light' that might flood into elegy and the darkness of 'death', which 'makes us stingy', recalls Maurice Blanchot's suggestion – discussed in the Introduction to this thesis – that the profound obscurity of the dead will both draw the elegy in the direction of the dead and make it impossible for the elegy to bring the dead 'back to the light of day' (1982: 171) in words that might promise a reconciliation, but merely act to confirm the loss of the other in his essential fullness.

But there is perhaps a more poignant personal relevance to Carson's above observation that denotes the distinct separateness that marks the relationship between herself and

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[1] Carson is a poet and classicist. Her translations include: *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (Alfred A. Knopf: 2002); *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (The New York Review of Books: 2006); *An Oresteia: Agamemnon by Aiskhylos; Elektra by Sophokles; Orestes by Euripides* (Faber and Faber: 2009). Poetry collections include *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (Jonathan Cape: 1999), inspired by the legend of Herakles, and *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (Cape: 2001). Following *Nox* (New Directions: 2010), Carson's *Red Doc >* (Cape: 2013) returns to the story of Geryon from *Autobiography of Red*.

[2] As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, *Nox* is unpaginated throughout. Consequently, quotations from *Nox* appear without page citations.

[3] Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus (*c.* 84-54 BC). There is no surviving biography of the poet, and very little is known about his life. He addresses 101 to his unnamed brother. In the appended notes to her translations of Catullus, Josephine Balmer infers from the poet's work that Catullus's brother 'died on the Hellespont, somewhere near Troy', and adds that 'it has been suggested that Catullus's visit to his brother's grave took place while the poet was on his way to serve in Bithynia in 57 BC' (Catullus 2004: 142).

her brother, and which inhabits the pages of *Nox*. Between the time of his sudden departure from Canada in 1978 (she sees him for the final time two weeks before he runs away) and his death, Carson reveals that her brother communicated rarely. She writes in *Nox* that 'he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years', indicating that during his life, he inhabited a space – emotionally and geographically – that was beyond her reach. The words of her brother 'cannot add to' the elegy because, aside from brief and sporadic interchanges with Carson, his voice is as marked by absence as he is during his lifetime. This virtually wordless incarnation of her brother is a precursor to the silent presence that Carson observes in *Nox* when she travels to his location of his death:

> In cigarette-smoke-soaked Copenhagen, under a wide thin sorrowful sky, as swans drift down the water, I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me. […] To put this another way, there is something that facts lack. "Overtakelessness" is a word told me by a philospher [*sic*] once: *das Unumgängliche* – that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them.

The corporeal reality of Carson's brother has over time been displaced by a resilient 'muteness' that between the time of his disappearance and his eventual death comes to supplant the elegised in her mind. Notably, it is the muteness of her brother that Carson is 'looking […] into' rather than the brother himself, suggesting that a characteristic possession of the elegised has displaced him as the entity towards which the elegy is directed. It is not the brother that 'resists me' but his speechlessness, which meets with an incomprehensible silence the elegist's attempts to understand and articulate it. Muteness is a microcosm of her brother's overtakelessness – a simultaneously unavoidable and unfathomable condition that shapes the identity of the elegised even as it 'remains beyond' all attempts to be understood. Just as Carson reveals the literary enactment of a relationship with muteness, rather than the elegised himself, so, from a wider perspective, it is the overtakelessness of the elegised – not the elegised per se – 'about which one collects facts', and therefore that with which she ultimately engages in the space of *Nox*.

Given Carson's implication that the elegised is displaced by his own overtakelessness, does the elegy become more preoccupied by its relationship with this condition than with the absent other that the concept notionally describes? If, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, overtakelessness removes the dead to a place 'beyond the hope of touch' (Dickinson 1970: 690), then what remains for the elegist but to try and

touch – figuratively speaking – the presence of the condition that has supplanted the desired, but irredeemably absent, other? In this chapter, I will examine via Carson's *Nox* the movement of elegy into a territory of materiality – in the form of photocopied fragments of objects and the physical construction of the book itself – as an attempt to figure the concept of overtakelessness and to demonstrate the ways in which these objects act to shape a presence that is denoted by its absence. Personal relics, in particular a letter that Carson's brother sent to their mother, are situated in *Nox* not merely as possessions of the elegised other – like the muteness to which Carson refers, above – but as fragments in their own right, which simultaneously supplant the elegised as a presence and serve as an uncompromising reminder that the elegised is permanently absent, beyond the reach of the elegist.

The translation of the elegised via fragments of personal relics to Carson's constructed space mirrors, and is informed by, the practice of translation that Carson undertakes of Catullus's poem 101. *Nox* is bookended by Catullus's original Latin version of his poem, and then by an almost illegible copy of Carson's translation, typed on a scrap of apparently ancient and water-damaged paper. Carson's largely indecipherable language in the document that she includes at the end of *Nox* suggests in a visual manner that her own words cannot see to the back of what has already been expressed by Catullus, because the process of translation fails to encompass the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the original text. Carson admits in *Nox* that '[n]othing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction […]. I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101'. The interaction between Carson and Catullus's original text, specifically the untranslatable substance of its individual words and phrasing, mirrors the relationship between the elegist and the elegised; the overtakelessness of the Roman poet's language inevitably resists the translator and results in what Carson regards as an unsatisfactory version of its original inscription.

Catullus's original text, which is simultaneously inhabited by the Roman poet's presence and his irremediable absence, possesses a muteness that is constituted by the unwillingness of its diction to disclose its secrets to the translator. In *Nox*, Carson moves beyond a translation of the whole and addresses each individual fragment of Catullus's poem – all sixty-three words of the original text are considered on separate pages that

run throughout *Nox* – in a manner that resembles her treatment of her brother's personal relics. That is to say, in extracting each of Catullus's words for individual attention, Carson affords the words a discrete status similar to that which is assigned to the fragments of material objects. In this way, it can be argued that the words of Catullus serve as a figuration of the overtakelessness of Carson's brother, as the interaction between the translator and the original text intersects with the relationship between the elegist and the elegised.

The physical and emotional distance that characterises the relationship between Carson and her brother is foregrounded not only by Carson's explicit attention to the word 'overtakelessness' in *Nox*, but also by the ways in which overtakelessness in itself – figured principally by means of material objects and the dynamics of translation – displaces the elegised as the primary focus of her elegy. Carson claims of *Nox*: 'It's not about grief. It's about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages' (Sehgal 2011). Carson suggests that in one particular respect – the absence of tangible personal emotion – she brings her own form of muteness into the book; the writer is silent during particular moments where images of objects and family photographs are translated into the space of *Nox*, but at the same time demonstrate a resistance to full assimilation by remaining decontextualised and uncaptioned. In *Nox*, the 'separate language' of Carson's brother – figured largely through the expression of material objects – exists alongside, and intersects with, the discrete language of Catullus, serving to establish a presence that embodies the overtakelessness of the dead. How does translation, and its constituent parts, establish its presence in *Nox*? And in what particular ways does the process of translation begin to describe the interaction between overtakelessness and Carson in her dual role as elegist/translator?

Translation and Laplanche's Model

When Carson notes, above, that overtakelessness describes that which 'cannot be […] seen to the back of', she indicates a point of intersection for elegy and translation. Underlying Carson's observation of her brother's muteness, and its resistance to her scrutiny following his death, is an implicit frustration at the inability of the translator's language to delve sufficiently beneath the surface of another language, that of the original text, and encompass the enigmatic substance of the poet's words and phrasing.

For the translator, the original text presents a similar obstacle to that which is presented by the dead to the elegist. Both translator and elegist encounter an entity that 'cannot be avoided' – the translator's impulse to create a notionally complete translation can be as strong as the elegist's desire to accomplish a full recovery of the elegised other – but ultimately 'cannot be got round', in the sense that something will always be missed in the process of both elegiac and linguistic translation.

The irresistible appeal of both the elegised other and the original text is captured by their figuring as unavoidable presences that remain ultimately elusive, beyond the reach of their pursuers. In an interview during which she discusses her work, Carson remarks on the particular obstacles faced by the classical translator: '[T]he texts that I deal with in classics are most of the time incomplete, emended, full of mistakes, conjectured, and so on, and you learn to kind of resist the surface in dealing with classical texts' (McNeilly 2003: 20). The potential impulse of the translator to 'resist the surface' might in itself serve as a useful point of resistance to a perceived muteness in the original text, and demonstrates not only the importance of a mistrust for what first meets the eye, but also the strong allure for the translator of a nether world of associative exploration. When Carson writes, above, that she is 'looking a long time into the muteness of my brother', she proposes an investigation into not only the idea of muteness as a concept, but also the specific structure of muteness as it relates to, and represents, her brother – a 'looking […] into' that depicts muteness as a physical organism that might be surgically opened up and explored.

For the elegist/translator, an attempted investigation of the muteness of the elegised other and the original text is also an act of entering what could be described as the territory of overtakelessness, an amorphous frontier where irresistible allure meets irredeemable resistance, where the impulse to encompass and comprehend comes up against the inarticulable. Reflecting on the practice of classical translation, Carson refers to what she calls 'the space between languages', which is, she adds, 'a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all' (McNeilly 2003: 14). This particular space for the translator, where words refuse a neat transition 'between languages', finds a parallel in the practice of elegy, where the 'language' of the text experiences the limitations of its reach as it attempts to cross the divide between the word and the plenitude of the elegised other. In Chapter 2,

Mary Jo Bang experiences the frustration 'of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all', as Carson puts it, when she struggles to engineer a meeting point between her poetic language and her dead son.

In many ways in *Nox* the space between languages is what Carson inhabits by means of both her practice of translation *and* of elegy, as she considers the complex structure of the space itself and the profound obstacles presented to the satisfactory translation of material from the respective entities – the original text and the elegised other – that exist on the other side of the space. In order to help illuminate Carson's particular approach to translation in *Nox*, and the way in which this approach in turn might shed light on her interaction with overtakelessness, it will be useful to consider French psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche's exploration of the processes of psychoanalytic translation. Specifically, Laplanche offers a significant modification to Freud's conceptualisation in his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' of the psychoanalytic processes involved in the work of mourning, which I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. In summary, Laplanche contrasts his thinking with that of Freud, who according to Laplanche conceives the 'disentanglement of the libido' as the 'breaking of links' between the libido and the object. This is a more radical and violent detachment than that proposed by Laplanche, who sees 'mourning as a work of unweaving […] so that a new fabric can be woven, disentangling to *allow* the formation of new knots' (1999: 253-54).

Laplanche takes as his model for relating the work of mourning to the work of psychoanalysis, that of Penelope in Homer's *The Odyssey*, who engages in delaying tactics to ward off suitors by weaving a large fabric while she is waiting for the return of her husband. Her tactic, writes Laplanche, is to weave, 'with the sole aim of unweaving, […] to gain time until her Ulysses returns'. Laplanche adds that 'Penelope does not cut the threads, as in the Freudian theory of mourning; she patiently unpicks them, to be able to compose them again in a different way' (1999: 251-52).[4] Laplanche suggests, by

[4] In Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, Book Two, 'A Hero's Son Awakens': 'So every day she wove on the great loom – | but every night by torchlight she unwove it' (1963), p. 22, ll. 68-69. According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*: 'All the young men of the neighbourhood asked for her [Penelope's] hand, and when she refused they moved into Odysseus' palace, hoping that their extravagant revels would force the young woman to give in by bringing about her financial ruin under her very eyes. Penelope thought of a trick. She told them that she would choose a husband from among them when she had finished weaving Laertes' [Odysseus' father] shroud, and the work which she did by day she unravelled by night. After three years of this, however, she was betrayed by a maidservant' (Grimal 1991: 337). Ulysses is the Latin form of the name Odysseus.

means of his reconfiguring of the process of mourning, an act of unpicking and studying material as it relates to the object of mourning rather than the cutting of threads proposed by Freud. When Carson remarks that she is looking a long time into the muteness of her brother, there is an indication of the contemplation of what constitutes his overtakelessness – as opposed, say, to a denial or diminution of the condition that now encloses him. Laplanche's account of Penelope's subsequent retention of her 'threads' in order to 'compose them again in a different way' is a reworking of matter that for Carson represents a reinterpretation of material pertinent to her brother in a way that notes both its unassimilable nature and the overtakelessness that supplants his presence.

In order to illustrate Carson's reworking and reinterpretation of material, there is a particular point in *Nox* when Carson repeats on successive pages what appear to be identical blocks of text with information about when her brother ran away, where he travelled, and the fact that '[h]e wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl died'. In the first version of this text, there is a key passage: 'He was travelling on a false passport and living under other people's names. This isn't hard to arrange. It is irremediable. I don't know how he made his decisions in those days.' The second version of the text, on the following page, is identical save for what appears to be a crudely inserted handwritten comma in the final sentence of the above passage between 'how' and 'he', which alters the tone and sense of the words (Figure 7, p. 129).

In what might be described as her own psychoanalytic translation of material that relates to the object of mourning, Carson attempts to disentangle particular moments from her brother's history. In many respects, her brother cannot be seen to the back of: after he ran away, he effectively made himself invisible – to the authorities from whom he was fleeing and from his own family. In addition, he had 'no return address', so that his location remained opaque. Furthermore, 'he was travelling on a false passport' – effectively cloaking his presence in absence even while he was alive – a circumstance that according to Carson 'is irremediable', indicating that such obscurity will remain a feature of her brother's life, even after *Nox* has been published. To take just this small section of text in Figure 7 is to be left with several important questions: why did her brother run away in 1978, and what had he done that meant he faced jail? What was the 'something' that he was 'seeking', and how did 'the girl' die?

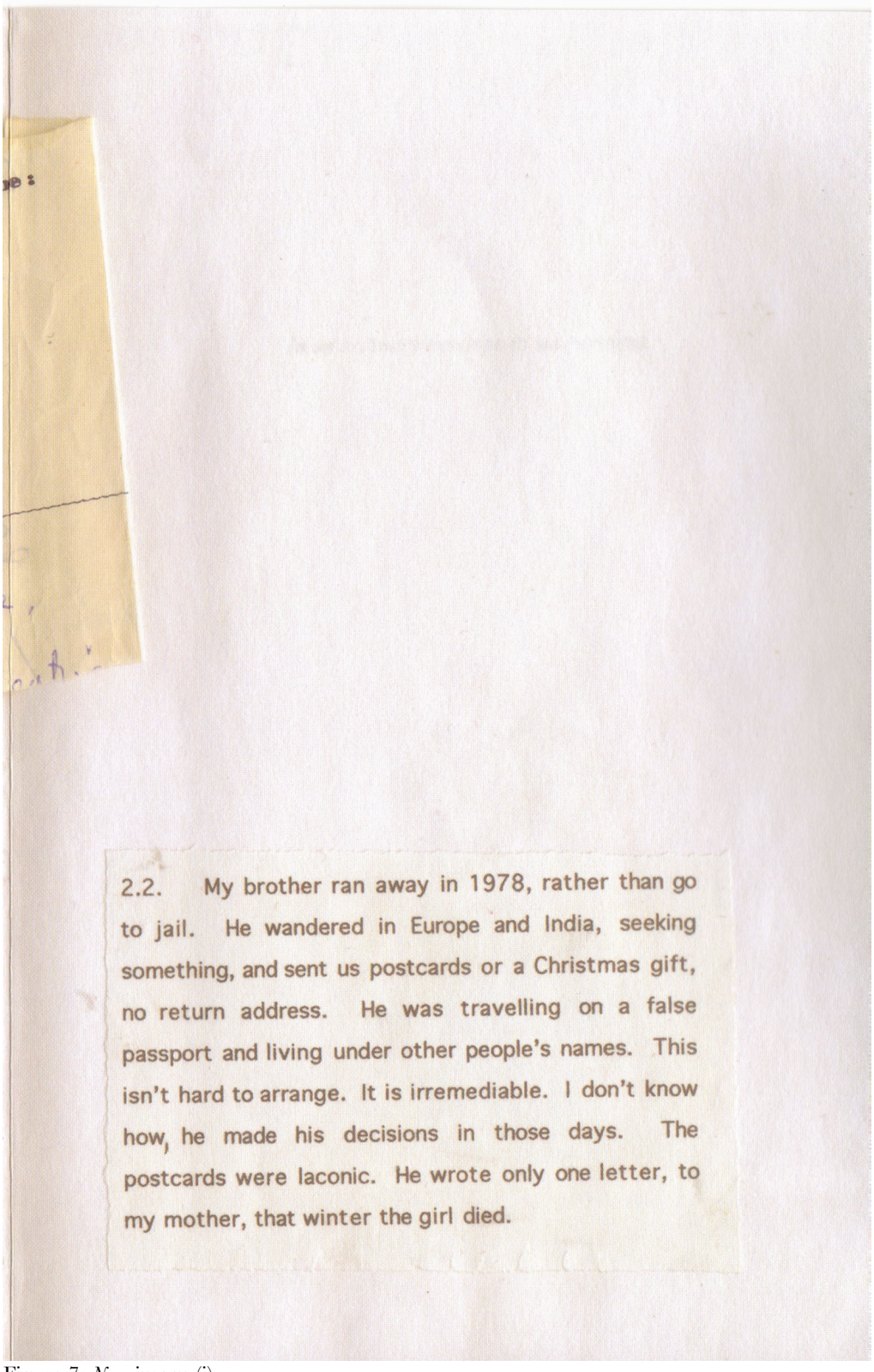


Figure 7: *Nox*, image (i)

Carson's simple, enigmatic sentences in Figure 7 are opaque in a way that suggests not only the difficulty experienced by the elegist in translating particular historical material relating to the elegised, but also the problematic relationship that the elegist faces with

that material once it appears on the page. Carson indicates the elusiveness of the elegised in her sentence, 'I don't know how he made his decisions in those days', but she also shows the muteness of her own words in their encounter with the silence of her brother. When Carson attempts to unweave the material that might be buried in her opaque phrasing by weaving a handwritten comma into the text, she effectively forms new knots: is the altered sentence meant to express the idea that Carson does not 'know how' her brother managed to travel 'on a false passport' or to live 'under other people's names'? Or is the newly isolated construction 'I don't know how' intended to remain non-specific, deprived of a coherent conclusion to complete its expression? Either way, the insertion of a defined pause in the reworked version of her text establishes a barrier that divides the 'I' and the 'he' into two discrete clauses, so that the comma marks 'the space between languages' that Carson notes above, and serves to embody the territory of overtakelessness that sits between the elegist and the elegised other.

In Figure 7, Carson attends to particular threads of her brother's life, and within those threads she scrutinises – and encourages the reader to examine more closely – a reworked sentence that serves as a visual depiction of her brother's overtakelessness. In 'The Unconscious: Structuring as a Translation', an essay on the work of Laplanche, Andrew Benjamin quotes from a paper in which Laplanche sets out his conceptualisation of the mourning process: '…the loss obliges one to effect a disentanglement, a painful meditation. But each thread, if it is detached by me from the all… is not broken as Freud pretended. On the contrary it is overinvested [*surinvesti*], meditated on in isolation' (1992: 143).[5] In this way, each individual thread potentially acquires a discrete status that executes its own separation from the body that harbours it, so that the thread can be addressed and considered on its own terms, and not simply as a part of a larger whole. In *Nox*, Carson's translation pages – in which she devotes separate documents to explore each individual Latin word from Catullus's original incarnation of his poem – position themselves as a means of isolating particular facets of Carson's relationship with her brother. In effect, Carson's interaction with Catullus becomes interwoven with an interaction with her brother – figured through fragments of translated language (Figure 8, p. 131).

[5] Benjamin quotes from page 29 of Laplanche's 1989 essay 'Temporalité et Traduction: Pour une Remise au Travail de la Philosophie du Temps', *Psychoanalyse à l'université*, 53, pp. 17-35. The translation is Benjamin's own.

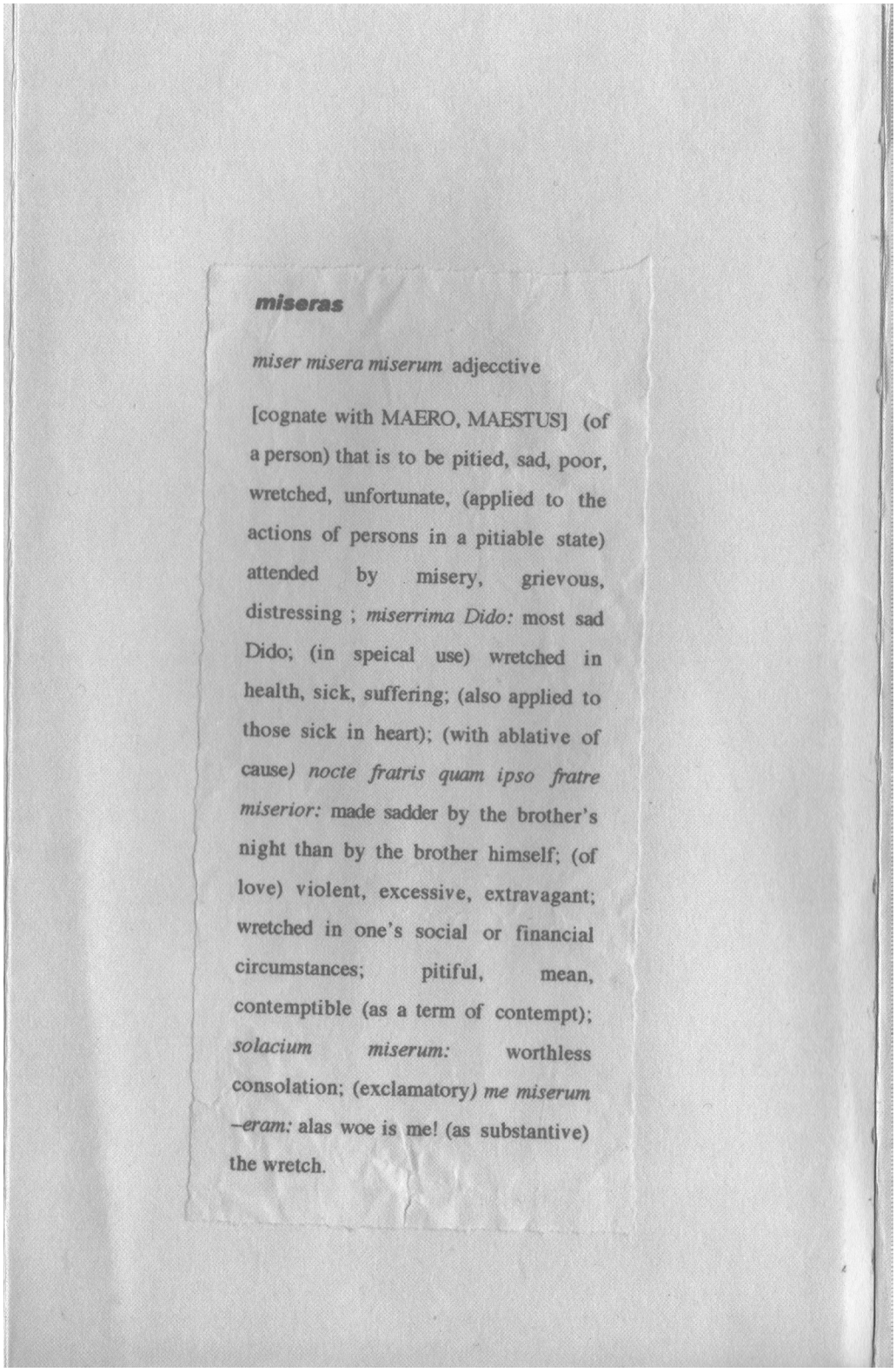


Figure 8: *Nox*, image (ii)

Carson's translation page for the word 'miseras' is a microcosm of the second line in Catullus's poem, '*advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias*', which appears in Carson's translated version as 'I arrive at these poor, brother, burials'. The primary meaning of

'poor' appears on the second line of the translation page, and there follow a number of decontextualised definitions, until the appearance of the phrase '*nocte fratris quam ipso fratre miserior:* made sadder by the brother's night than by the brother himself'. Carson's use of the definite article 'the', rather than the possessive 'my', to indicate 'brother' recalls Bang's separation from her own raw emotion, discussed in Chapter 2, and noted in the Introduction to this chapter.

But a more notable event in Figure 8 is the displacement of the brother as an entity in himself by 'the brother's night', which supplants the elegised other as a focus for sadness. The isolation of this particular phrasal thread, within the overall context of a translation of the fragment 'miseras', suggests that the impenetrability of the brother's night, with its undertow of death and mourning, has – like her brother's muteness – detached itself from its possessor and stands alone, presenting itself for the prolonged contemplation of the elegist. The 'night', as it is depicted in the above passage, becomes 'that which is not to be gotten around [*Unumgängliche*]' (Heidegger 1977: 177), a textual signification of overtakelessness – not least in Carson's positioning of 'Nox' on the title page of her book. On this theme, it is also worth noting the translation page for 'atque', isolated from the final line of Catullus's poem, '*atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale*', which Carson translates as 'and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell'. Carson concludes her assorted phrasal definitions with the construction, '*similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night'. Here, Carson reinforces the idea that it is 'night' and not 'him' that becomes the focus of her attention in *Nox*; the common ground that appears to show a connection between the 'I' and the 'him' is undermined by the darkness that shrouds their negotiations.

In Figure 9 (p. 133), another potential connective for Carson and her brother is subject to what appears to be physical intervention. Carson extracts the word 'gentes' from the opening line of Catullus's poem, '*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus*', which appears in her later translation as 'Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed'. The final fragment of Carson's translation, 'offspring' – a word that notionally harbours both Carson and her brother with regard to their blood relationship – is itself fragmented by a tear in the bottom right corner of the scrap of paper on which it appears.

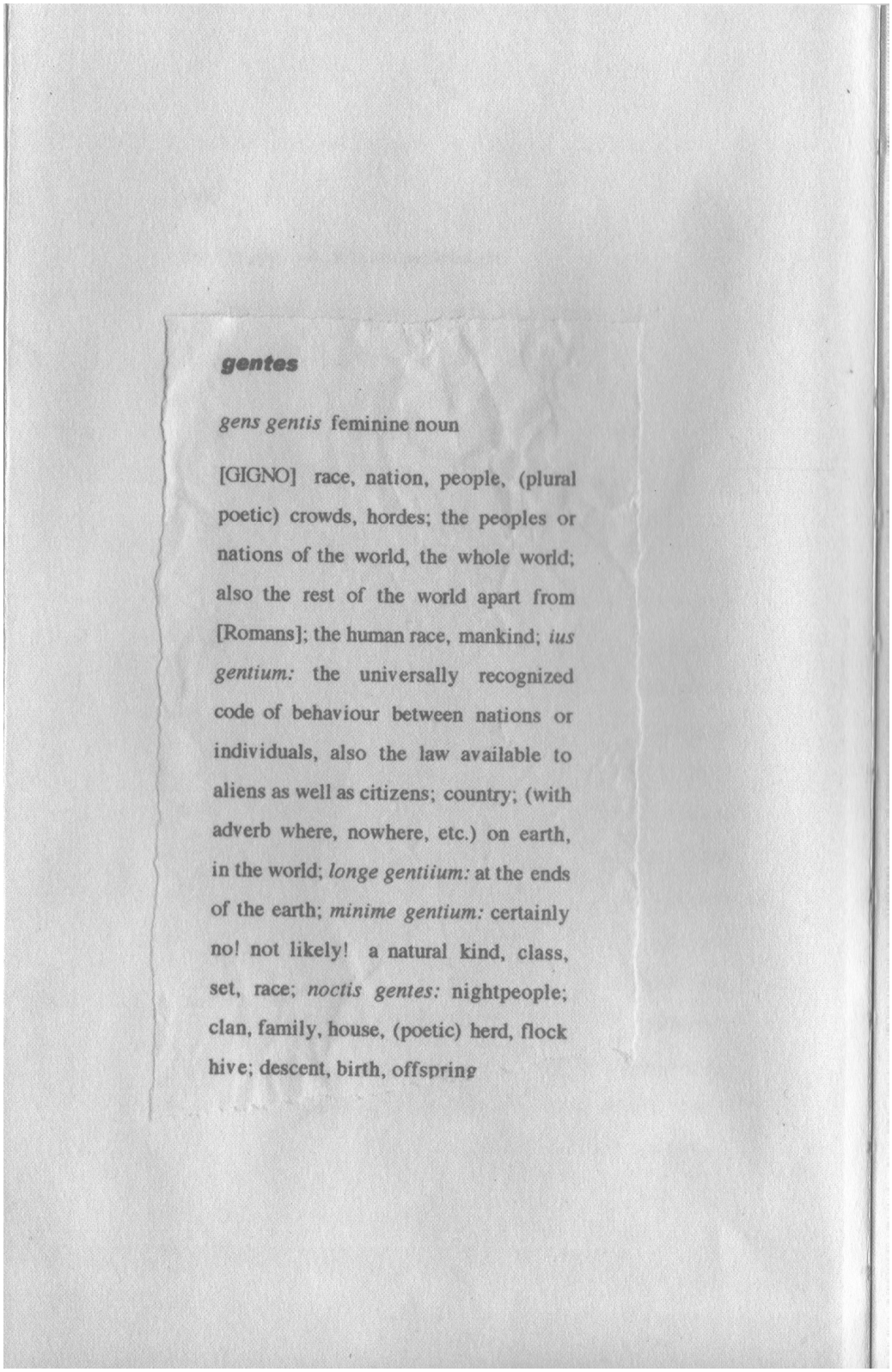


Figure 9: *Nox*, image (iii)

Carson's physical intervention recalls from Chapter 1 the fractured phrases in Susan Howe's collages that suggested the words of the dead – and therefore the dead themselves – resist straightforward assimilation by the elegy. In Figure 9, Carson

indicates the obstacles faced by her own particular translation, as her new text – what could be termed the 'offspring' of Catullus's original text – is incomplete; a portion of her translation has been lost in the process of its transition between languages. In turn, the fragments of Carson's brother are translated into a particular elegiac space – the physical construction of which establishes a presence that goes some way to detaching itself from the elegised other that it harbours. In what ways does *Nox* as an object in itself become an embodiment of the overtakelessness that encloses Carson's brother, and how does Carson interact with the materiality of her own book?

The Book and its Body

There is a paradoxical quality to the construction and performance of *Nox* as a material object. It is constituted by a single length of paper – folded to create an accordion effect and contained inside a solid cardboard box with a lid that even when lifted remains part of the complete structure of the container (Figure 10, p. 135). The stack of paper sits snugly inside its made-to-measure compartment, so that each individual 'page' folds into and accommodates its companion. The accordion format means that each notionally separate page is unavoidably part of a larger whole, fashioning a connecting thread that appears to contradict the division and disjunction that inhabits its textual and visual material.

However, the idea of irremediable division that sits at the heart of the *work* of *Nox* is reinforced by the discrete components of the book's material structure and the ways in which these components operate – when the box is closed, the body of its paper is enclosed by an opaque structure that constructs a narrative of restriction and confinement in a space filled with darkness (Figure 11, p. 135). The act of removing the folded accordion stack from its enclosure merely emphasises the idea of two inert bodies separated from one another; when the compressed accordion is released, the folds in the paper unfurl, but retain their physical definition, so that the separateness of the pages is distinct.

Figure 10: *Nox*, opened box
Image credit: © dailypoetics, 'NOX by Anne Carson', Flickr/Creative Commons,
https://www.flickr.com/search/?sort=relevance&text=Anne%20Carson%2C%20Nox

Figure 11: *Nox*, closed box
Image credit: © dailypoetics, 'NOX by Anne Carson', Flickr/Creative Commons,
https://www.flickr.com/search/?sort=relevance&text=Anne%20Carson%2C%20Nox

There is a certain flexibility afforded to the author – and the reader – that would not be possible if Carson were to adopt a more conventional format for *Nox*. In her examination of the history of the artist's book as a physical and visual genre, Johanna Drucker observes that the 'accordion' format 'allows the work to have the uninterrupted flow of a scroll while also functioning as a book whose pages and openings can be accessed at any point in the sequence' (1995: 140). Notions of freedom from the more restrictive construction of a conventionally assembled book suggest that Carson might be granted the facility – at least from a visual and possibly an interactive perspective – to see to the back of her brother; she might even fashion a means of getting round his overtakelessness and discover the elegised other in his fullness. However, it could be said that it is precisely this facility that draws Carson into an interaction with the materiality of the book and which ultimately enacts a displacement of the elegised.

There is scope for Carson to interact with the material body of her book in a way that is perhaps not available in her relationship with her brother. Drucker notes of the artist's book format the characteristic feature of 'manipulations […] wrought upon the object of the book' as part of a catalogue of interventions so that 'every […] possible advantage [is] taken of the material form as matter to be worked' (1999: 4-5). As noted above in Figure 9, there is a distinct tear in the scrap of paper that interrupts the progress of the translated word 'offspring'. But what is also noticeable in Figure 9 is a particular effect of light and shade that affords the scrap of paper a quite authentic three-dimensional effect, encouraging the illusion that it might be touched, and that in *Nox* – a photocopied version of an original scrapbook – this fragment of paper exists as a separate entity to the page on which it is affixed. In a profile of Carson, Craig Morgan Teicher reveals that Robert Currie, who is credited on the inside of the lid of *Nox* with assisting 'in the design and realization of the book', discovered a way in which to artificially endow certain documents with the impression of ageing:

> What Robert Currie figured out was how, in a book about the passage of time, to reproduce the sense of lost time communicated by Carson's original collage – the faded letters, the dog-eared corners of the photos, the awkward way all of it was held to the page with staples and glue. According to Carson, Currie 'thought of scanning it and then xeroxing the scans. We were in Berlin for a while at a place that had a xerox machine, and he fooled around with it at night, scanning and xeroxing and lifting the cover a bit so a little light gets in, so it has three-

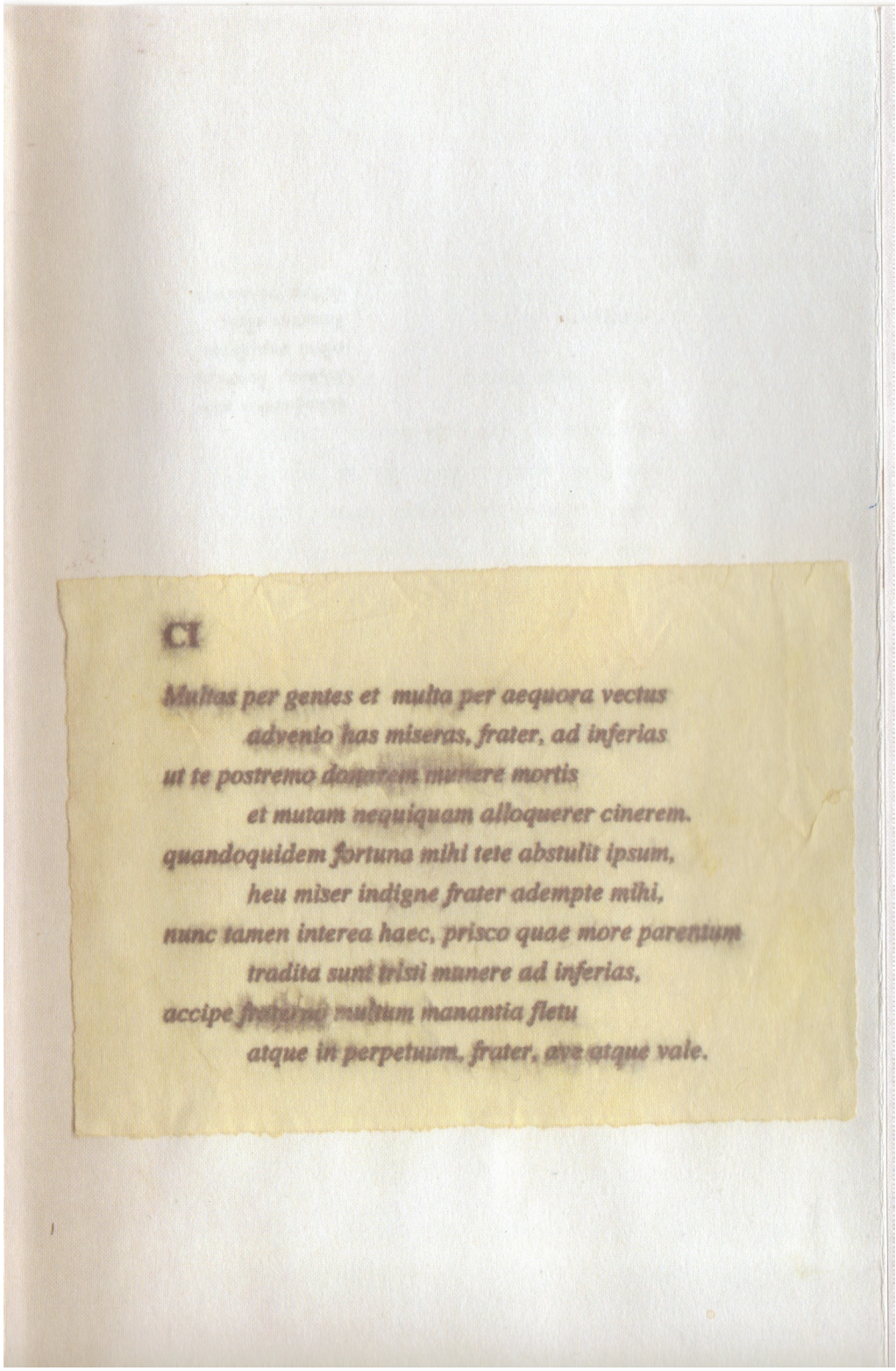
> dimensionality. The scan is a digital method of reproduction, it has no decay in it, it has no time in it, but the xerox puts in the sense of the possibility of time.'
>
> (2010)[6]

In the Introduction to this chapter, I noted Carson's stated desire in *Nox* 'to fill my elegy with light of all kinds', pointing to a notion of retrieving an incarnation of her brother that might illuminate, and be illuminated by, the work in which he is incorporated. But as she admits, 'words cannot add to' the fact of his death, and 'no matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was', she encounters – like Orpheus – a fundamental obstacle in her attempts to pull the other out of darkness. However, via Currie she fashions an influx of light by 'lifting the cover' of the 'xerox machine', so that a desired interaction with her brother – whereby his opacity and muteness might be at least partially seen to the back of – is displaced into a mechanical means of adding the effect of 'three-dimensionality'. The difficulties of translating the materiality and three-dimensionality of original objects into the space of a book are replicated in an attempted translation of the plenitude of the elegised other onto the printed page. Carson finds a way of adding light to her elegy, but it 'puts in the sense of the possibility of time' rather than its authentic and felt reality. What she finds when she lifts the cover is not 'the starry lad', but the artificial light that gives the illusion of a substitute for his own three-dimensionality.

In Chapter 1, I noted in Figure 3 the way in which Susan Howe aims for a textual depiction in her word-collage of the deleterious effects of time and disintegrating memory; the semi-occluded phrase 'marked by the distortion' appears as an inverted, compressed seam of language, sandwiched above and below by fragmented lexical deposits (Howe 2010: 70). The distortions of memory are made visible by the elegist's words, which even as they attempt to shape recollections – and reshape the elegised in the space of a poetic present – make a tacit admission of their inadequacy and unreliability. If, as Howe suggests in her textual collage, and Bang discovers in *Elegy*, words cannot close the gap between the past and the present – between a previous

[6] Writer and artist Currie, who is Carson's husband, has collaborated with Carson on a number of projects. In a discussion about *Nox*, he reveals that the original 'had been lost for a number of years; when it resurfaced we were resolved to find a way to publish it. […] We were just searching for a way to replicate the intimacy of Anne's original' (King 2012). In an interview, Carson reflects on her work with Currie, and the realisation of *Nox*: 'I make a page, which is a flat event. Currie has a way of observing any page and knowing how it would be in space. He added spatiality to these pages' (Sehgal 2011).

presence and a present absence – then Carson's physical intervention to produce a particular visual effect might present a means of restoring 'the sense of lost time', as Teicher remarks above. Consider, for example, Carson's reproduction of Catullus's poem in the original Latin, which appears at the beginning of *Nox* (Figure 12):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Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.
quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,
heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

Figure 12: *Nox*, image (iv)

This reproduced scrap of paper gives all the appearance of an authentically aged document: some of the words are badly blurred, and the paper has a yellowish tinge, as if the effects of time have caused the manuscript to deteriorate. However, like her engineered effect of three-dimensionality, it appears this is the result of a clever intervention on Carson's part: in a review of *Nox*, Meghan O'Rourke claims that '[t]o achieve the yellowing effect, Carson soaked her typescript of the poem in tea overnight' (2010). There are also noticeable creases in the scrap of paper – similar to those which are visible in the fragments depicted in Figure 8 and Figure 9 above – that might also point to the impact of the passage of time, but are probably more indicative of a vigorous interactivity between the author and the physical body of her work.

As part of her wide-ranging discussion of artists' books, Drucker draws the reader's attention to Mira Schor's *Book of Pages* (1976), an artwork in the form of a journal, which contains miscellaneous textual and visual items.[7] Like Carson's *Nox*, Schor's work also features a mute subject – Drucker remarks that '[t]he male figure who is the object of Schor's attentions becomes a muse who refuses to speak' – and its material body shows signs of significant deterioration: 'The edges of the pages are frayed, brittle, cracking – as if the work has been through seasons of weathering and wear'. Drucker adds:

> One […] feels the experience of the material object […] as a record of struggles and damage, survival and testimony. […] Here the pages of a life are also the skin, surface, of a body which cannot help reveal its scars as the history of its experience.
>
> (1995: 103-04)

Drucker proposes that the present materiality of the book itself – with its 'record of struggles and damage' and 'its scars' – supplants the absent materiality of its silent subject. In this way, *Book of Pages* echoes the performance of *Nox*, where Carson not only invests her pages with a distinct materiality, but also translates into her pages copies of material objects that speak *of* their subject and to a large extent speak *for* their subject. How does Carson interact with the fragments of her brother's 'body', which are configured in *Nox* by the photocopied fragments of his personal relics?

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[7] There are several photographs of *Book of Pages* on Schor's website, <http://www.miraschor.com/> [accessed 25 May 2014]. The website of New York's Brooklyn Museum also features a detail from Schor's artwork, 'Brooklyn Museum, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base: Mira Schor', <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/mira_schor.php?i=796> [accessed 25 May 2014].

Material World: The Fragments of *Nox*

Carson's use of textual and material fragments in *Nox* recalls Susan Howe's word-collages, in which fragments of the body (of work) of the elegised other are retrieved from the concealment of the archive in such a way that the elegist's body – that is, the body of the poem and of the poet's work – effectively becomes a repository for the ashes of the dead. As noted earlier in this chapter, Carson's encounters with fragments pre-date her elegy for her brother, as they are embedded in her professional experience as a classical translator, where encounters with incomplete texts are commonplace. Eight years prior to the publication of *Nox*, Carson published *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, a translation of the complete extant work of the Greek poet, of which she notes in her Introduction: 'Of the nine books of lyrics that Sappho is said to have composed, one poem has survived complete. All the rest are fragments' (2002: ix).[8] Carson approaches the frequent moments of incompleteness in Sappho's work by indicating 'destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line' with square brackets so that an impression of the translator's experience of 'trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp' can be transferred to the pages of her translated text (2002: xi).

In his analysis of Carson's translations of Sappho, Glenn Kurtz reflects on the significance of her editorial approach:

> When we acknowledge that Sappho no longer exists as an integral voice, and her poems no longer represent a coherent corpus, then Carson's spacing and brackets become signifying elements of the poems, marks of each abortive effort to find completion. And the words that remain – by themselves inadequate to describe the particularity of experience – nevertheless convey something more than themselves. They have resonance as fragments because a larger absence surrounds them.
>
> (2010: 252)[9]

[8] According to Carson, 'Sappho lived in the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos from about 630 BC. It is not known when she died. […] She appears to have devoted her life to composing songs; scholars in Alexandria collected them in nine books, of which the first book alone had 1320 lines. Most of this is lost' (2002: ix).

[9] In 'What Remains: Sappho and Mourning', Kurtz interweaves a consideration of Carson's translations with recollections of his own dead brother: '*Who he was* may be lost to me now. Yet my brother persists in me as an influence, as fragments and questions that are not fixed and cannot be completed. I have a relationship with *how* he is now, a relationship not with him but with the absence of him, with his death' (2010: 253).

Kurtz's examination of the dynamics of Carson's translation of Sappho has wider implications for the workings of elegy. When faced by the absence of the complete body (of work) of the pursued object, the elegist/translator is presented with a dilemma about how to proceed. The irresistible allure of the irretrievable dead might provoke a continual return to the page, as enacted in Chapter 2 by Mary Jo Bang, but the temporary solace located in a poetically restored conversation with Bang's dead son is inevitably shattered by his ultimate unreachability. Bang's elegies are in this sense explicit 'marks of each abortive effort to find completion', as her language fails to execute a permanent, and complete, return of the dead. If the words of the elegist/translator cannot add to it, as Carson remarks of the death of her brother, then the fragment – whether textual or visual – acquires an importance that resides partly in the fact of its emanation from the original 'coherent corpus'. But the 'larger absence' of the original body affords each fragment a significance that detaches itself from its relation to the source, so that they acquire 'resonance as fragments' in themselves rather than merely as miscellaneous shards that owe their existence to the unifying whole. The value of Carson's translation of Sappho, adds Kurtz, is rooted in the fact that she 'lets the fragments have a new life as fragments' (2010: 252).

In his essay on the work of Laplanche, noted above, Andrew Benjamin discusses the process of '"de-translation"' (1992: 140) undertaken by the analyst – that is to say, the working through and interpretation of material presented by the analysand – and in particular a crucial part of this psychoanalytic activity, wherein '[t]he analyst in the process of "de-translation" works to break the translation into significant elements in order that they can be presented to the analysand'. These 'significant elements', Benjamin describes as 'the segments of the "de-translated"' (1992: 147).[10] Subsequently, in his discussion of how the segments acquire their meaning, Benjamin points out the contrast between the 'diachronic' [concerned with the way something has developed and evolved through time] and 'synchronic' [concerned with something as it exists at one point in time] with regard to the significance of each 'segment'. The relevance of the 'diachronic' in relation to the 'segment' – or, as it might be applied to Carson's

[10] In his discussion of the process of detranslation, Benjamin takes his cue from page 26 of Laplanche's 'Temporalité et Traduction': '…for as much as the analytic process can be understood by a process or the procedure of translation, the interpretation in terms of the past [*de passé*] (infantile archaic) is not a translation but a detranslation [*detraduction*] a dismantling, a retrogression [*retrogradation*] of a translation' (1992: 140-41). The translation is Benjamin's own. See above at n. 5.

work, the textual and/or visual fragment – consists in the fact that 'the meaning of each of the constitutive parts is provided by the sequence in which they take place and therefore which they form. This is the determination of meaning within and due to narrative'. The 'synchronic', on the other hand, involves the 'segment' being removed 'from its place within a narrative, and thus also from its articulation within narrative time', to constitute what Benjamin calls 'a repositioning and thus a redesignation of the place of meaning' (1992: 147).

For Carson, this process of 'repositioning' – in which fragments acquire resonance as fragments – affords a fresh significance to the segments of material that she translates into the space of *Nox*. Benjamin's observation that '[t]he "de-translated" elements come to be mined for the possibilities that they may contain' (1992: 148) has direct relevance to Carson's extraction of each of Catullus's words and her vigorous investigation into the illuminative potential of her translated segments. But Carson also turns her attention to the material fragments of her brother – and in particular, her brother's letter to their mother, revealed by Carson in her accompanying text to be the 'only one' he wrote to the family during his twenty-two years of absence, and in which he relates the news of the death of his then girlfriend. Carson extends her reproduction of segments of the letter over seven separate pages; the first extract in particular offers a cryptic account of what her brother has to say (Figure 13, p. 143).

Carson mines the possibilities of the retrieved material object in Figure 13 by a process of folding and tearing sections, which appear on successive pages, so that discrete segments acquire their own specific resonance. In the fragment of her brother's letter, a series of truncated sentences are left on the verge of full disclosure: 'they are an out to lunch'; 'who take advantage of'; 'I'll never know how she'; 'Six days later she was'; 'I went crazy. it'. What amounts to Carson's manipulation of her brother's narrative illustrates in one sense the elegist's observation of the prematurely terminated speech of the dead and recalls once again Mary Jo Bang's conception of each elegy as a temporarily restored conversation that is repeatedly cut off and re-ignited. Further, Carson indicates that the elegised undergoes a fundamental change in the process of his translation to the elegist's page. The extract from his letter demonstrates the transition of her brother from coherent corpus to fragment, which does not merely speak in his

stead, but speaks in its own incomplete, enigmatic fashion – a point that Howe is keen to emphasise by means of her sonic fragments, discussed in Chapter 1.

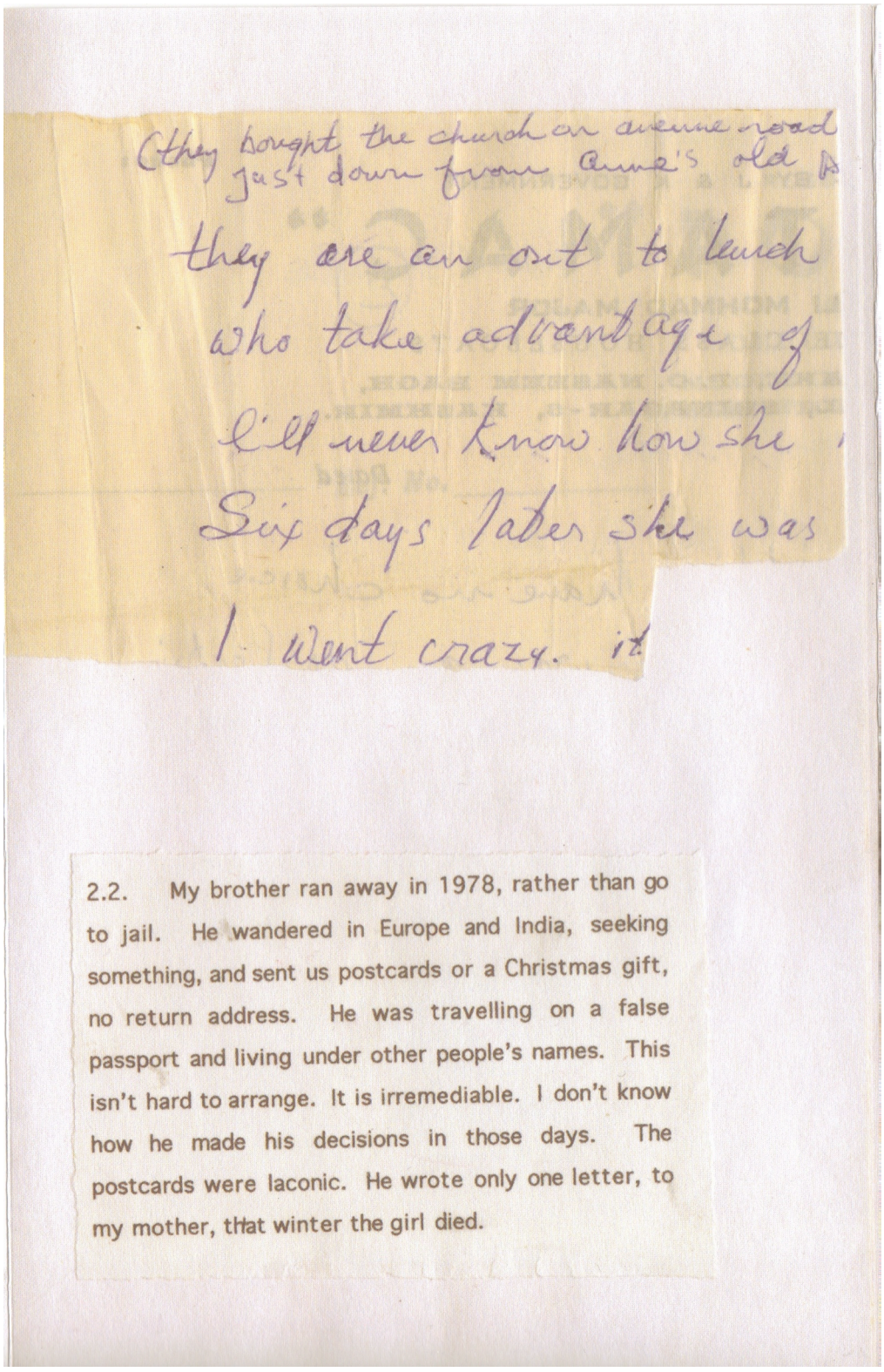

Figure 13: *Nox*, image (v)

Over the course of the following pages in *Nox*, this fragmented letter is gradually unfolded so that a more complete narrative is disclosed: 'they are an out to lunch group of head shrinkers who take advantage of weak people. I'll never know how she met them. Six days later she was dead.' In one sense, Carson's gradual revelation of the substance of her brother's letter allows the reader to see to the back of her own manipulations of the material object. But the overtakelessness of the elegised remains resolutely in place – even as a notionally complete object, the letter remains a mere fragment of her brother's complete narrative. Carson mines the potential of the object by folding and tearing, and then restoring it in a gradual process of reassembly, but it is different from the original letter – not least in the fact of its appearance as a photocopy, rather than its former three-dimensional incarnation. The letter is a highly personal segment of Carson's brother – in the sense that it has emanated from his hand, and has then been removed from his possession by the event of death – but its mutability is an indicator of its difference and its detachment from its original source.

This notion of separateness between the fragment and its absent owner is raised in Susan Stewart's analysis of the relationships between narratives and objects – in particular, her observation of 'the false promise of restoration' (1984: 150) carried by the object. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, the object retrieved from the possession of the dead is simultaneously a tangible – and potentially consolatory – presence and a stark, uncompromising reminder that the dead are permanently elsewhere and irretrievable. Further, Stewart notes with particular relevance to the mourner that even though 'the souvenir' may position itself as an authentic trace of the absent other, '[i]t represents not the lived experience of its maker but the "secondhand" experience of its possessor/owner' (1984: 135). Carson's folding and tearing of the letter, above, indicates the transition of this particular object from its original status as a product of, and a canvas for, the 'lived experience' of Carson's brother, to its new status in *Nox* – the re-assigned fragment, which relates the '"secondhand" experience' of the elegist through its mutating form and appearance. Stewart adds that '[t]he souvenir is by definition always incomplete' and is 'a sample of the now-distanced experience, an experience which the object can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup' (1984: 136). The distance between the retrieved letter and its 'maker' – that is, Carson's brother – is exacerbated by the fact that the 'experience' which it relates in its written narrative is immediately distanced from the writer at the moment it is

represented in language – a point, as discussed earlier in this thesis, that is especially pertinent to the poetic mourner.

The original object of mourning is displaced in *Nox* by a material object that bears the inimitable hallmark of his presence – a personal narrative inscribed in his own handwriting – and his absence: his lived narrative becomes word, and then material object, reproduced for the pages of Carson's elegy. The letter becomes her brother, in that it affords an insight into what might have been his experience at a particular moment in his life. However, the way in which Carson simultaneously ventriloquises her brother – altering his narrative by a process of intervention and manipulation – shows that he has become quite remote from the object that he made. Her brother's past presence and present absence are emphasised precisely by Carson's possession of the object that is the letter and the ways in which she tampers with its contents – an intervention that would have been far less likely when he was alive and the letter was in the possession of their mother. Elsewhere in *Nox*, a collage of postage stamps serves to keep this letter in mind, while also executing its own detachment as a supplementary material fragment that is itself composed of discrete segments (Figure 14, p. 146).

The particular objects depicted in Figure 14 establish a material link to Carson's brother given her revelation in Figure 13 above, that 'he wandered in Europe and India, seeking something, and sent us postcards or a Christmas gift', but his muteness remains vividly depicted in the silent faces that feature in several of the stamps. The most prominent of the stamps, emerging in the top left area of Carson's collage, bears the country name 'DANMARK' and recalls Carson's studied contemplation – noted earlier in this chapter – in 'cigarette-smoke-soaked Copenhagen' of her brother's muteness; Copenhagen as the location of her brother's death and funeral gives an added resonance to Carson's observation that his postcards included 'no return address'. The stamps act to trace her brother's path in his absence, but they become gradually more detached from their source, travelling beyond the physical presence – and touch – of the elegised into the homes of others and finally into the space of *Nox*. In this way, the stamps act as an embodiment of emotions (both those *of*, and those invoked *by*, the elegised) that lose their attachment to the corporeal body – in the case of Carson's brother, a process enacted by his extended absence. Carson reflects at one point in *Nox* that despite her brother's muteness – she remarks that 'during the last seven years of her

[Carson's mother] life he wrote to her not a single word' – and continued uncertainty regarding his whereabouts, nevertheless 'I wasn't sure new feelings were finished arr[i]ving from him yet'.

Figure 14: *Nox*, image (vi)

In their study of the significance of material objects in experiences of grief and mourning, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey make a general point about the personal and metaphorical worth of apportioned objects such as stamps, even though in their previous life they may have offered little beyond their functional value. These relics are, they write, 'objects that retain and hold traces of previous experiences' (2001: 12-13), not least for Carson in the sense that they pinpoint particular moments in a life. Furthermore, Hallam and Hockey note that 'in […] material forms we find traces of the body', which has a potential consequence of 'embodied engagement with such objects, and the spaces they inhabit' (2001: 85). In this context, one particular type of object, which harbours visual and metaphorical 'traces of the body', reveals itself as an important and evocative relic for the elegist. In what ways does Carson engage with the photograph in *Nox*, and how do her interventions in this medium contribute to the establishment of its presence as a discrete and vibrant entity within the elegy?

'Cutting Off': The Performance of the Photograph

Carson's contemplation, and manipulation, of the textual fragments of her brother in the above extract from a personal letter indicate an encounter with traces of the body of the elegised other that recalls Susan Howe's recovery of textual fragments and their subsequent translation into her collages, which foreground the incompleteness and incomprehensibility of the dead. Howe's retrieval of a trace of the dead, rather than an imagined version of a whole, serves to foreground what is missed by the elegy. But for Carson, it is the material form of the paper on which her brother's words are written – and her interventions at the site of that paper – that begins to describe the process of displacement that has taken place, as the fragment detaches itself from the body of the elegised other and becomes the focus of the elegist's attention.

Given Carson's admission that words cannot add to her elegy, she implies that a more tangible materiality might prove a strong allure for an elegist whose notional subject is noted for his muteness. As a material object, the photograph is potentially most enticing in its apparent capacity to capture visual traces of the *corporeal* body, so that what remains out of reach of the written word might be retrieved and contemplated via this particular medium. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes appears to add weight to this idea

when he observes of the photograph that 'the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object' reach across time and space to forge a potent connection: 'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here' (1993: 80). Barthes suggests a tangible materiality fashioned by 'luminous rays', which recalls once again Carson's desire to fill her elegy 'with light of all kinds'. But the distance that divides a past corporeal presence and Carson's present illusion of three-dimensionality, fashioned by lifting the cover of the xerox machine 'so a little light gets in' (Teicher 2010), echoes in Barthes's implication of a mutation from 'a real body' to 'radiations'. An 'emanation', as he puts it, forges a connection but it also executes a separation – what was once flesh is now a two-dimensional representation of that which the camera captured.

The facility that is offered by the photograph – that it might somehow engineer a means of getting round the overtakelessness of the elegised other – may serve merely to establish a stark embodiment of overtakelessness itself. Richard Stamelman observes that '[p]hotography […] reveals that something intensely present can also be intensely absent' (1990: 274). A personal photograph of the elegised might be instrumental in creating the illusion that what it offers is not just a trace of the body, but the body itself – particularly if the space which that body inhabits in the photograph is one that was shared by the mourner. However, in reality, adds Stamelman, the photograph is 'the trace of something that was sufficiently present to leave its imprint but, having subsequently disappeared, is no longer knowable except through the imprecise markings it has left behind' (1990: 275). The elegised – like the particular moment in time at which he was captured – has vanished, so that a past presence coexists with a present absence. Significantly, according to Stamelman's argument, the photograph might supplant its subject as a repository for feelings that were previously directed towards the elegised other. The 'imprecise markings' are what remains of a person whose irretrievable surplus is contained by the actual body that has disappeared. In *Nox*, Carson gives visual prominence to her brother's body by placing a full-length photograph of him on the outside of the box and then reproducing a smaller version of the same picture on the uppermost section of the enclosed body of paper (Figure 15, p. 149).

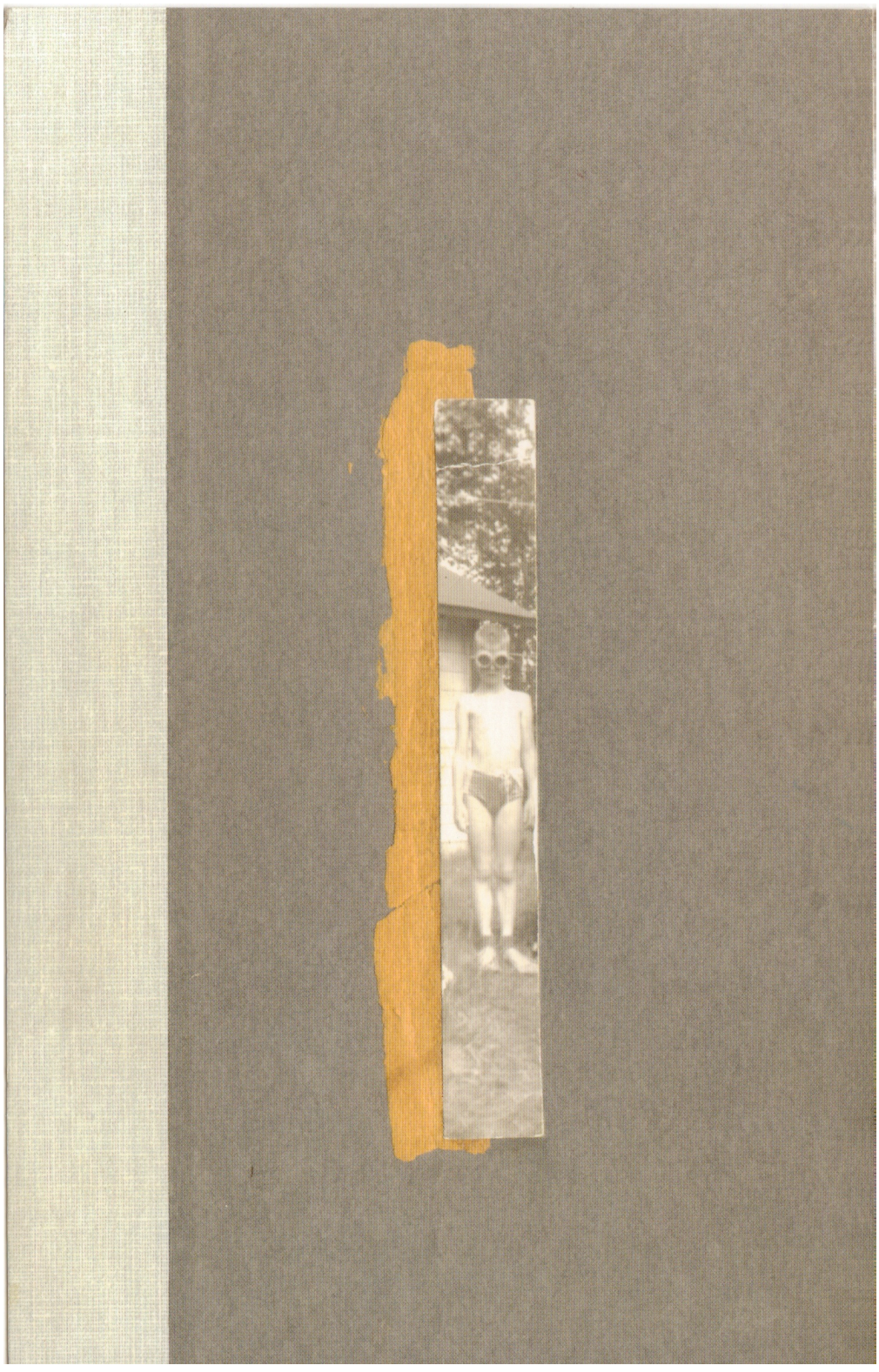

Figure 15: *Nox*, image (vii)

The immediate impression of this photograph of Carson's brother in Figure 15, cut into a narrow vertical strip, is of a sharpened focus on its subject, eliminating much of the space that he inhabits – aside from what appears to be one corner of a shed, part of a tree behind the shed, and the grass on which he is standing. The presence of the subject

is foregrounded at the expense of what might be regarded as superfluous, distracting material. But on closer inspection, this impression is misleading: the way in which the photograph has been altered means that part of his left arm and left foot have been cut from the picture. There is some damage to the left-hand side of the picture – part of her brother's right arm appears as if it has been deleted, enacting a discontinuation of his body. And the severely restricted format of the photograph means the subject is compressed into a confined space, his body put under significant pressure by the boundaries of his assigned space. In the photograph, her brother appears sullen, uncooperative, and his mouth is closed, representing visible signs of muteness. The fact that the photograph is a scaled-down version of its duplicate – itself a copy of the original object – on the lid of the box, reveals a gradual diminishment of the body of the subject as he draws closer to the main body of Carson's elegy. The elegised appears to be in retreat, even as the page captures his image.

The photograph is, in more than one sense, a stripped-down version of Carson's brother: he is presented almost naked, a child dressed only in a pair of swimming trunks, as if Carson is attempting to uncover her brother – to see him in a way that words cannot. But his eyes are hidden behind opaque swimming goggles, and he is wearing flippers on dry land. In one sense, he is a child at play – caught in a particular moment where he is perhaps inhabiting a fantasy world – recalling from Chapter 2 Mary Jo Bang's fashioning of a textual unreality in *Elegy*, wherein her son is frequently re-imagined as a child. Carson, too, might be engaged in an attempt to idealise her brother, and in the process preserve him from the uncomfortable reality of overtakelessness. But this theory is undercut by the way in which the crudely cut photograph enacts his displacement from the wider space that he inhabits – and within that space, the water from which he has perhaps just emerged, or into which he might be about to disappear.

In her critique of photography, Susan Sontag notes its capacity for 'slicing out [a] moment and freezing it' (1979: 15) – an action that for the elegist might be alluring in its apparent promise of a capture of the elusive other and the space he occupies. But evidence of physical intervention in the above photograph shows that for Carson this action incorporates also the literal 'slicing out' of contextual detail, so that much of the moment of her brother's experience is also lost in the process of its transition to a manipulated image. Sontag remarks that in one respect, '[a] photograph passes for

incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened' (1979: 5), indicating that the material form of the photograph and the visual nature of what it depicts appear to offer the prospect of a more satisfying encounter with the elegised other and the space he inhabits than is made available by the printed word. But Sontag adds the caveat that despite this attractive impression of an available 'proof', appearances can be deceptive since 'photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are' (1979: 6-7). In Chapter 2, Bang discovers that the artifice of the poem makes a version of the elegised other that is a mere representation of the *made* human being that was previously created and nurtured within the maternal body. But Carson's slicing of the above photograph represents a further interpretation of what is already 'an interpretation of the world', as Sontag describes it.

In Figure 16 (p. 152), a photograph is cut into two separate segments, which are in turn divided by a fragment of text. The way in which this photograph has been cut – foregrounding the shadows of two human shapes – appears to show that its primary focus is what remains of the body when its corporeal reality has disappeared. Each flat, two-dimensional shadow is a visual depiction of the trace of the actual body, the three-dimensional surplus of which remains beyond the frame of the photograph. It is apparent that what is contained *inside* the parameters of Carson's photograph draws attention precisely to what it signifies *outside* its assigned boundary – the body is present as a shadow, but not in the plenitude of its physical form. In his discussion of the medium, Christian Metz remarks that 'the off-frame effect in photography results from a singular and definitive cutting off […]. It marks the place of an irreversible absence, a place from which the look has been averted forever' (1991: 161).

In Figure 16, Carson's own cutting off of the photograph's human presence, which remains off-frame, is an enactment of her encounter with overtakelessness – the 'place of an irreversible absence' that remains out of reach of the photograph is nevertheless indicated within the photograph by the presence of distinct shadows. Metz's observation of the 'averted' gaze – as performed by Orpheus in his abortive attempt to lead Eurydice out of the Underworld – indicates that the photograph *as* elegy captures in its frame a particular version of the dead that shows the irretrievable fullness of those who are sought; but it is in fact simply a confirmation of what has been lost, which remains in a place off-camera, outside the parameters of the frame. Metz observes that the

photograph is 'undermined and haunted by the feeling of its exterior, of its borderlines, which are the past, the left, the lost' (1991: 161). What lies outside the elegy, and therefore undermines its capacity to reach the dead, is a lost other whose fullness is to a large extent determined and defined by what is *not* captured in the space of the poem.

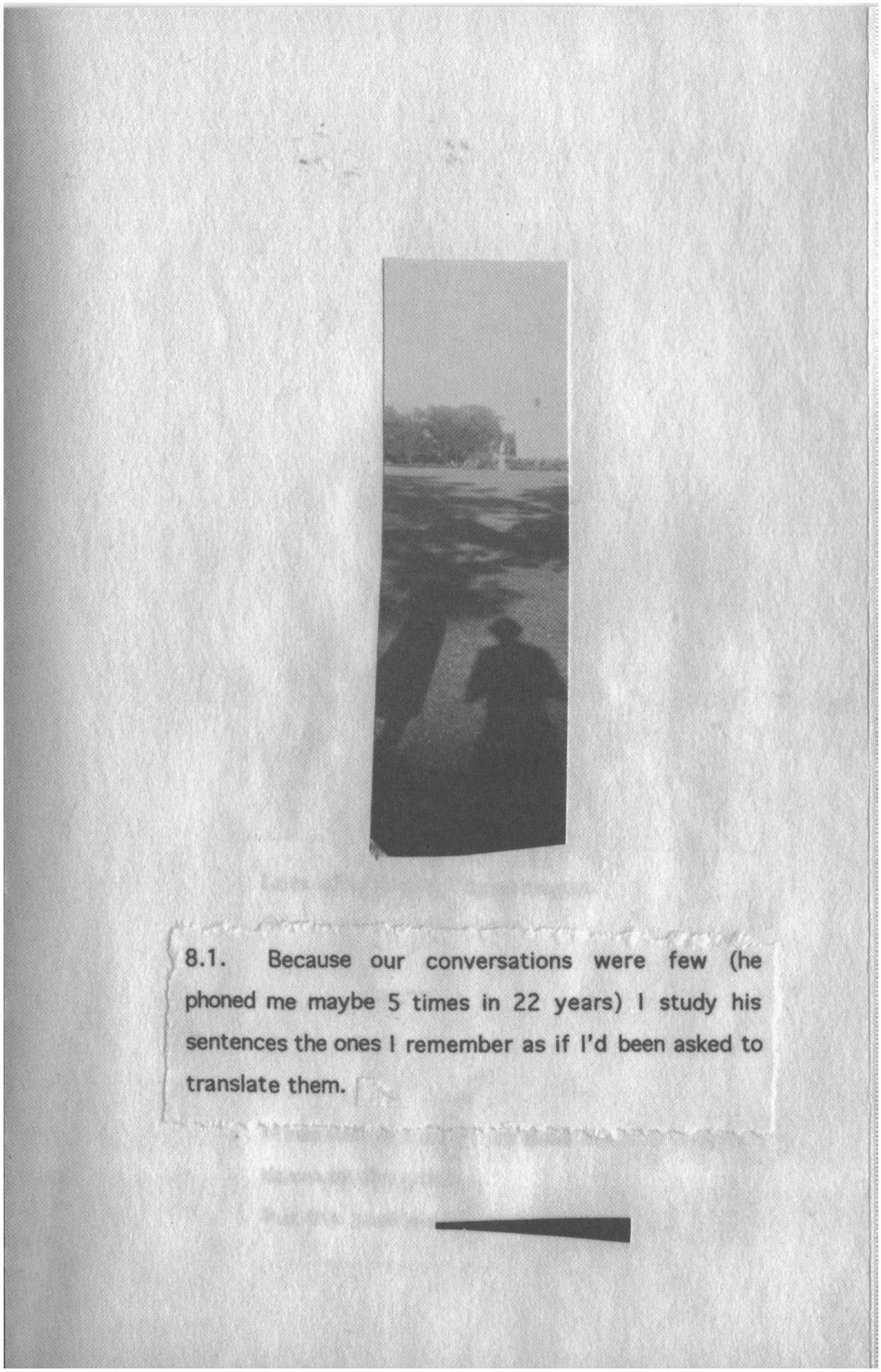

Figure 16: *Nox*, image (viii)

At the bottom of the page, displaced from the main body of the photograph in Figure 16, is a sliced out fragment that is constituted entirely by shadow – it contains within its frame a highly concentrated representation of what is lost, that which exists in an irretrievable place of absence. It is as if Carson has drawn the segment away for separate contemplation, in a similar manner to that in which she looks into her brother's muteness and his rare moments of speech: 'I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I'd been asked to translate them'. In Figure 16, Carson appears to visualise the detachment of her brother's muteness from the plenitude of his self – and therefore the establishment of this muteness as a separate entity with which she engages – by figuring his unfathomable silence as a material sliver which has become separated from the fullness of its original body. Her brother is translated into a material form that is notable for its opacity – when contemplated as a discrete, autonomous segment, rather than a sliced out part of its larger body, it is as mute and resistant to comprehension as the elegised figure that it displaces.

Elsewhere in *Nox*, Carson assembles what appears to be a selection of fragmented photographs in a collage (Figure 17, p. 154). In her collage, Carson makes visual – and material – a resistance to assimilation by means of her fragmentation: photographs that might have offered a clue to narrative and context are manipulated to such an extent that an attempted scrutiny of their content yields little. There seems to be a shadow in the lowermost segment, and towards the top of the page there are what appear to be pictures of windows in a brick wall. But the glass is as opaque as the remaining fragments depicted on the page. Hallam and Hockey make an observation about family photographs that they are often '[a]rranged in clusters' in order to 'establish connections between family members' (2001: 153), but Carson subverts this convention by fashioning her fragments into what appears to be a teetering tower, which is held together by staples. The connections, as depicted in Carson's collage, are apparently strong, but ultimately flimsy – if the staples are unpicked, the photographs will collapse into one another, becoming even more indistinguishable than they are in their current incarnation. Moreover, it appears Carson has constructed a visibly artificial means of connection and interaction that points to the artifice of the elegy – its fashioning of a framework that ostensibly holds the elegised other.

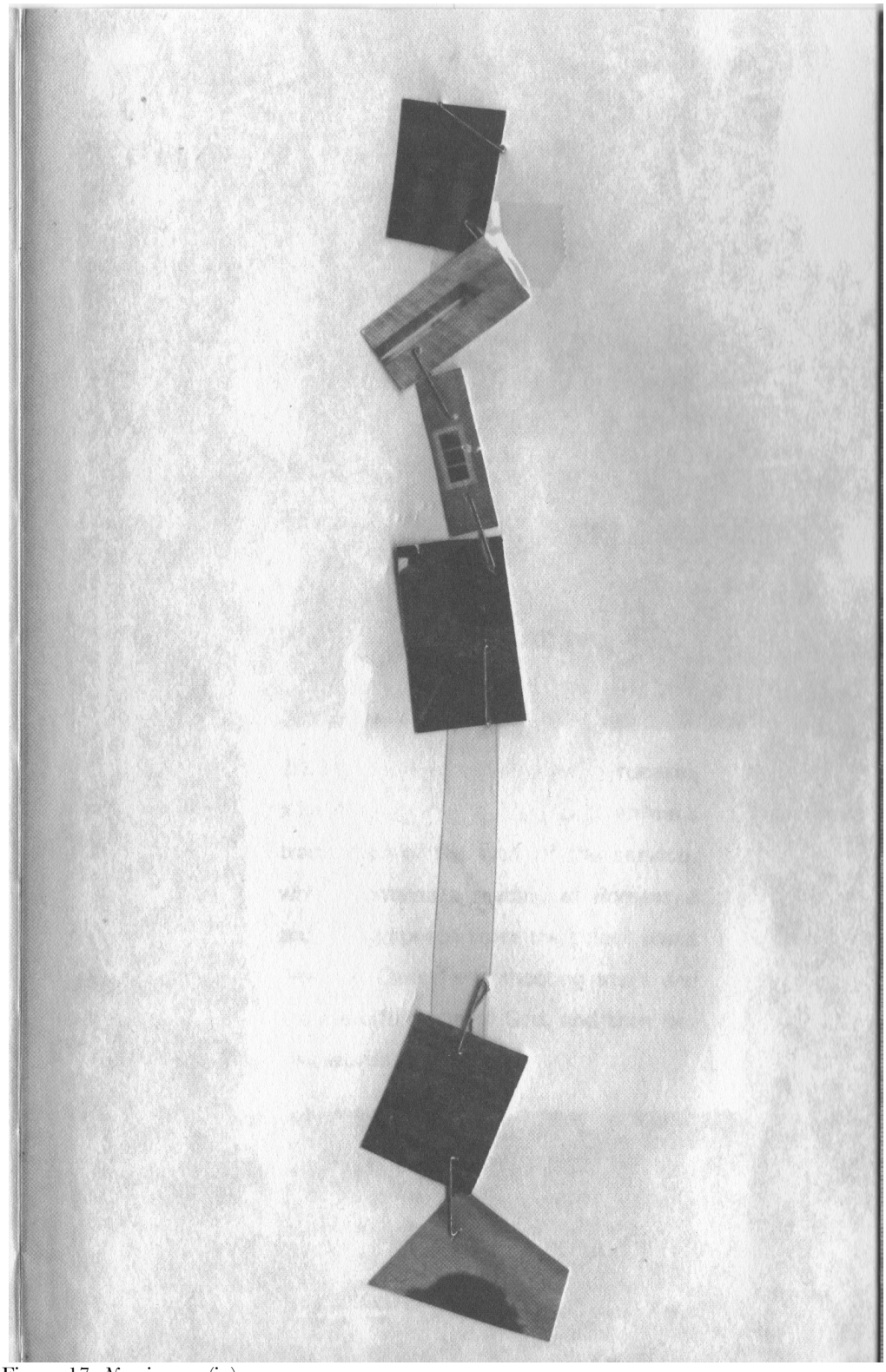

Figure 17: *Nox*, image (ix)

The photograph, like the poetic elegy, appears to offer the elegist the prospect of intimacy, but its encounter with overtakelessness serves as a reflection of its silence and flatness, the illusion of a three-dimensional depiction that is made still more illusory by Carson's manipulations of her material. In her study of photography, and in particular

the ways in which it represents the family subject, Marianne Hirsch observes 'the tension between […] the little a photograph reveals and all that it promises to reveal but cannot' (1997: 119). There is an added tension in *Nox* – constructed as an elegy for a brother – that recalls from Chapter 2 the potential impact on Mary Jo Bang's poetry of a reader's demand for intimacy and a graphic expression of grief, given the personal nature of her loss. However, Carson's repeated fragmentation and obfuscation of what is already an enigmatic item indicates that she is incorporating into the structure of the resistant photograph a measure of her own resistance to the suggestion that she might uncover the elegised other in any significant way.

The opacity of Carson's photographs, which in Figure 17 she translates into a strange, unfathomable object, serves as a reminder of Carson's manipulation of Catullus's words in her translation pages, where a full understanding of her enigmatic phrasal definitions – deprived of a wider context and narrative – is likely to prove as elusive for the reader as Carson's brother is for the elegist herself. Carson's stapled photographs in Figure 17 convey a muteness to the reader that is fashioned not only by their visual opacity, but also by the idea that what is remotely visible – the shadow and the windows – are enclosed in the private experience of the mourner and the object of her mourning.

There is a clue to the mute materiality of *Nox* in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, where objects that are left at the memorial are so apparently obscure to the neutral observer that they can perhaps reveal a complete narrative only to the dead themselves. Marita Sturken writes that 'a significant number of the artifacts left at the memorial are compellingly cryptic', such as 'a Harley-Davidson motorcycle' as well as 'a pair of Vietnamese sandals, […] a can of C-rations' (1999: 181). According to the official website, other items left at the Memorial include 'a painting on a sliding glass door which was left in association with a reproduction of a full-size tiger cage'.[11] Sturken claims that 'talismans […] have been left there as a form of speech' (1999: 181), showing that the material object might step into the vacuum left by the inability of language to reach the elegised other; however, its 'form of speech' is characterised for the distanced viewer by a particular form of speechlessness that simultaneously intrigues and excludes.

[11] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was completed in 1982. According to the official website: 'The memorial includes the names of over 58,000 servicemen and women who gave their lives in service in the Vietnam Conflict. The memorial also includes "The Three Servicemen" statue and the Vietnam Women's Memorial,' <http://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm> [accessed 24 June 2013].

Carson's photographs are essentially mute, despite the enticing hint of layers of history and memory buried within their opaque depths. Sontag remarks that '[t]he very muteness of what is, hypothetically, comprehensible in photographs is what constitutes their attraction and provocativeness' (1979: 24). In other words, the dynamic of the photograph serves as an illustration of the dynamic of elegy – what is permanently beyond the comprehension of the elegist might simply accelerate the desire to grasp what is out of reach. The muteness of the photograph might be at least partially counteracted by textual supplements to the visual object, given Sontag's observation that '[t]he caption is the missing voice' (1979: 108). However, when Carson does choose to accompany her photographs with words, the text is often so ambiguous as to add a further layer of impenetrability to the item that it is purporting to illuminate. For example, underneath a photograph in *Nox* that appears to show a distorted face, scarred by dark shadow, Carson's caption reads: '*Single motion which departed, leading itself by the hand*'.

Carson's apparent refusal to add verbal illumination to her visual object might indicate an unwillingness to allow language too much say in an elegy that is constructed at least in part as an exploration of muteness, its resistance to examination and comprehension. As discussed in Chapter 2, Mary Jo Bang discovers the ways in which language is unequal to the task of either pulling back her son into her poetic space or of describing her emotion in such a way that it might be accurately measured. In his analysis of Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'The Fish', Mark Doty points out the resistance of the subject to description through language – how it necessarily refuses 'elucidation' (2010: 31) – and concludes: 'It's the unsayability of what being is that drives the poet to speak and to speak, to make versions of the world, understanding their inevitable incompletion, the impossibility of circumscribing the unreadable thing living is' (2010: 30). Bishop's fish – its living, vibrant presence – eludes the grasp of language as surely as it evades repeated attempts to pull it out of the murky depths and onto the visible canvas of dry land.[12]

The 'unsayability of what being is', as Doty puts it, begins to describe the encounter enacted in *Nox*, where Carson makes different versions of fragmented and manipulated

[12] Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Fish', in *Complete Poems* (Chatto & Windus: 1991), pp. 42-44.

photographs. These fragments of visual material might promise the potential to retrieve a fuller, more tangible version of the elegised other than is possible through words alone, but the photographs ultimately embody the overtakelessness that it appears they might have the capacity to get round. In her essay on photography, Rosalind Krauss points out the distinction between what she describes as authentic and inauthentic versions of the subject: 'The true copy – the valid imitation – is that which is truly resemblant, copying the inner idea of the form and not just its empty shell'; whereas photography, adds Krauss, is 'the false copy – the image that is resemblant only by mechanical circumstance and not by internal, essential connection to the model' (1991: 23-24). In *Nox*, Carson takes what Krauss describes as 'the false copy', which she then photocopies – along with all of her other material – for inclusion in the elegy. There is, of course, a primary practical consideration bound up in photocopying for an elegist who seeks a means of translating her original scrapbook into a publishable and commercially viable product. But in a book that observes the physical and emotional distance that characterises a sibling relationship, and the supplanting of that relationship by translated visual and verbal embodiments of overtakelessness, it is worth noting the ways in which Carson's practical approach to the making of her elegy reinforces and illuminates these central concerns.

'As Close as We Could Get': The Photocopied Object

On the back of the box that holds the main body of Carson's elegy, are the words: 'When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get'. The resonance of the word 'close' travels through an idea of family relationships and the notion of fashioning an elegy that might achieve an emotional connection with its subject that was clearly not possible during his lifetime. Carson's translation of Catullus – how close her version might come to the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the original text – also underlies the idea of a 'replica', a textual copy of what is essentially beyond duplication. But Carson also notes in the phrase 'as close as we could get' that the materiality of *Nox* – personal relics such as postage stamps and photographs, as well as the scraps of paper on which Carson types her individual translations of Catullus's words – is constituted by photocopied replicas, shadowy equivalents of the shadows that are foregrounded in the sliced out fragments of Carson's photographs.

At one point in *Elegy*, Mary Jo Bang confronts 'the unbearable | Afterimage of the once material' (2007: 63), envisaging the translation of the elegised from external corporeal reality to an internalised, intangible presence that exists only in the mind. For Carson, there is an added relevance attached to Bang's words as they demonstrate the distance not only between herself and her brother, but also between the previously held tangible materiality of his objects and their 'afterimage' – the illusion of their complete presence in the pages of *Nox*. But whereas Bang indicates through her word 'unbearable' the intolerable emotional consequences of contemplating the sudden and irremediable absence of her son, *Nox* communicates more of a sense of what cannot be *borne* by the elegy. That is to say, through her use of photocopies of material objects, Carson is drawing attention to the irreplaceability of her brother's physical body and the fact that any form of artificial representation simply confirms the overtakelessness that the elegy might attempt to circumvent. Kate E. Brown observes that '[i]n mourning, the body becomes absolutely precious and absolutely problematic', before posing the rhetorical question, 'what do we mourn if not the loved one "in the flesh" – not a representation constructed by the self, but a material presence, indisputably itself, unfixed, irreplaceable, and therefore also painfully unmemorable?' (1998: 406). In *Nox*, Carson demonstrates that the indisputable materiality of the personal relic is as irretrievable as the body of her dead brother.

In his seminal essay 'The Task of the Translator', Walter Benjamin considers the distance between the original and the translated text when he writes, according to Harry Zohn's translation, that 'a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense' (1992: 81).[13] There is in Benjamin's use of the word 'touches' a suggestion of the possibility of an emotional, rather than simply a textual, relationship between the translator and the author of the original text that might then translate into a meeting of languages that moves beyond a basic transaction of lexical meanings. However, Catullus – rather like Carson's brother – is a shadowy figure, about whom very little is known; as she admits in *Nox*, Carson 'never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101', and there appears to be a similar disconnect in

[13] Benjamin's essay, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', was first published as an Introduction to Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, trans. by Richard Weissbach (Heidelberg: 1923), pp. vii-xvii, <https://archive.org/details/CharlesBaudelaireTableauxParisiens> [accessed 30 May 2014].

the attempted translation of her brother and his material relics into the space of her elegy.

Emily Dickinson positions the dead 'beyond the hope of touch' (1970: 690), and there is little explicit evidence of emotional or physical connection in *Nox*. With the help of her artistic collaborator and a xerox machine, Carson executes a convincing impression of the materiality of the staples in her photographic collage (Figure 17, above). In fact, the photocopied staples appear so authentic that one's first instinct is to touch the bent metal, but they prove to be elaborate trompe l'oeils – the promise of a tangible presence is as illusory as the closeness promised by the photograph of Carson's brother on the cover of *Nox*. In Figure 17, the staples are visible, but not touchable – as resistant to intimacy as the elegised other. In her analysis of the performance of objects, Susan Stewart writes that '[t]he acute sensation of the object – its perception by hand taking precedence over its perception by eye – promises, and yet does not keep the promise of, *reunion*' (1984: 139). The distance between desire and its fulfilment in the elegy is foregrounded by Carson's cleverly reproduced material objects, which through the illusion of their three-dimensionality repudiate an idea that the object might succeed where language has failed in its effort to reach the elegised in his plenitude and pull him back.

Conclusion

Carson observes at the beginning of *Nox* that 'words cannot add to' her elegy, so it is perhaps more pertinent to consider the question of what she can *add to words* – or more precisely, what can move into the vacuum that is left by words – in a book that contemplates the various dimensions of muteness. Of course, language forms a crucial component of Carson's elegy – not least in her extraction of each individual word from Catullus's poem for his own dead brother – but her translation pages resonate with the opacity that inhabits Carson's enigmatic phrases. Equally noticeable is the apparently authentic materiality of these pages – each scrap of paper on which she types her definitions shows distinct signs of creasing, and the three-dimensional effect of its ragged edges makes Carson's fragments of paper appear as if they are separate entities to the pages on which they are fixed. When she does examine her brother's words – the handwriting that appears on fragments of a personal letter – Carson engages primarily

with the materiality of the paper on which they are written, folding and tearing the letter as if she were trying to see to the back of her brother's words by manipulating the object that carries them.

When Carson allows material objects to speak without the interference of words, she finds that they infuse the elegy with their own particular form of silence – the unwillingness of photographs to speak fully of the elegised other, despite their apparent promise to facilitate a closer encounter than language, is exacerbated by Carson's violent fragmentations. Her interventions serve both to reflect and to deepen the muteness and absence that already suffuse the space of *Nox*: when her brother dies, she has not seen him for years; their communication after he runs away from home is brief and sporadic; she misses his funeral because his widow does not find Carson's contact details until after it has taken place. He is a blood relation to whom she was never close in his adult life; he had become detached both geographically and emotionally – a man who, as she writes in *Nox*, '[n]o one knew', and whom she terms 'strange brother'.

Carson's description of her brother recalls my discussion of Susan Howe's work in Chapter 1 – specifically, the observations of Emmanuel Levinas when he argues that a notion of separateness is crucial to an ethical interaction between the self and the 'strangeness of the Other' (1979: 43). Howe in the main engages with an unknown other – who is separated from the elegist physically, emotionally, and temporally – whereas for Carson there is perhaps a sense of strangeness in the very act of contemplating how her blood relation became so estranged from her while he was alive. The distinct separateness of brother and sister in turn gives Carson's elegy its own quality of strangeness, where material objects – like the muteness that Carson is looking a long time into – acquire such a resonance and presence that they appear to detach themselves from her brother and displace him as the elegy's primary focus. Carson's physical and emotional engagement with photographs, postage stamps and a personal letter become an examination of the overtakelessness that these objects translate into the space of the elegy.

Carson's evident engagement with the original versions of the material objects that subsequently appear in her elegy is characterised by a tactility that reinforces the absence of her brother in his corporeal form. But despite the illusion of three-

dimensionality afforded by an influx of artificial light, what is lost in their translation to *Nox* is precisely the substance and texture that gives the original item its unique quality of objectness. Carson appears to highlight a similar diminishment in Catullus's original words when she notes her dissatisfaction with her translation of his poem – that her version cannot help but be incomplete because of what she describes earlier in this chapter as 'the space between languages', which is 'a place […] of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all' (McNeilly 2003: 14).

In a close reading of Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator', which I touched on earlier, Paul de Man writes that translation gives the original 'a movement of disintegration, of fragmentation', and adds: 'This movement of the original is a wandering, […] a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled' (1986: 92). De Man's conceptualisation of the space in which translation operates initially suggests, via the phrase 'permanent exile', the notion of a tangible 'homeland' for 'the original', recalling Dickinson's vision of the body's transition from tangible to intangible presence, '[t]he soul her "Not at Home" | Inscribes upon the flesh' (1970: 690). As noted in Chapter 1, Susan Howe's 'house' (2007: 77) also juxtaposes ideas of presence and absence – the physical structure of the archive houses tangible textual fragments of the dead, which serve to foreground precisely what cannot be retrieved. For Carson, this ghostly 'movement' from a suggested location that is actually non-existent, as de Man describes it – 'nothing from which one has been exiled' – is not restricted to her engagement with the words of Catullus. It also gives some idea of the displacement of Carson's dead brother from his space of non-being to a form of presence in *Nox* – the fragmented and disintegrating material relics – that speaks of his absence. The 'wandering' of the original text, as its fragments detach themselves from their original body, is a movement that Carson observes of the fragments of her brother when she notes in *Nox* the gap of two weeks between his death and the news eventually reaching her: 'While I swept my porch and bought apples and sat by the window in the evening with the radio on, his death came wandering slowly towards me across the sea.'

Carson's separation of 'his death' from its possessor is indicative of a studied detachment that inhabits the pages of *Nox*. Whereas in Chapter 2, Mary Jo Bang attempts to make explicit her raw grief, Carson's often decontextualised and enigmatic material imparts

an emotional distance that points to her own form of muteness – a possible reluctance to admit too much of the gritty substance of herself into the pages of her elegy, beyond the obvious fact of her authorship. In the Introduction to this chapter, I noted Carson's observation of her book that 'it's not about grief. It's about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages', indicating the suppression of an outward show of emotion in both the self and the other. Carson adds by way of further explanation that '[e]xploring grief would have made it a book about me, and I didn't want that' (Sehgal 2011). Carson's intended concealment of the self in *Nox* presents an interesting counterpoint to the work that is featured in my next chapter, where the elegist reveals that the unreachability of the elegised is founded as much on his own failings – or at least those of his poetic alter ego – as it is on the overtakelessness that encloses the dead.

Chapter 4

'Everything's Flying Apart': Self-Mutilation in Dean Young's *Elegy on Toy Piano*

Introduction

When Anne Carson observes of *Nox* in Chapter 3 that 'exploring grief would have made it a book about me, and I didn't want that' (Sehgal 2011), she indicates an alertness to the notion that the elegist's negotiation with the dead becomes also a negotiation with the demands of the self. However, this dilemma cannot be entirely resolved by an attempted effacement of personal emotion – Carson's expressed desire for her book that the presence of the self should effectively be suppressed in this way is problematised by the fact that, in the scene of elegy, action on behalf of the dead is always to an extent action on behalf of the self. That is to say, the elegist's approach to the other can never be entirely objective – a complete effacement of the self – given that the presence of the other depends for its articulation on the imagination and action of the self. The inscription of the elegy is by definition the announcement of the presence of the elegist, regardless of whether she attempts to eliminate all outward signs of her own emotion.

In this chapter, I will study the work of a poet who appears to invert Carson's notion of an attempted suppression of the self. Whereas Carson claims that her elegy for her brother is 'about understanding other people […] as if we are all separate languages' (Sehgal 2011), the poems in Dean Young's *Elegy on Toy Piano* (2005) are notable for their attention to the self. In work that is peppered with apparently spontaneous digressions and moments of absurd humour, Young frequently trains his focus on the collective failings of humanity – failings from which, significantly, the self is not excluded.[1] His creation of a poetic space of play, where the elegised other is a repeatedly obliterated

[1] Young's first book of poems *Design with X* (Wesleyan University Press) appeared in 1988. Since then he has published nine more volumes, including *Strike Anywhere* (Center for Literary Publishing: 1995), and *Skid* (University of Pittsburgh Press: 2002). Following *Elegy on Toy Piano* (2005), his most recent work is *Bender: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon Press: 2012). Young cites surrealism as an important influence, but he is reluctant to describe himself as a surrealist. In an interview, Young notes '[t]he quality of invention […] at the core of Surrealist poetry', and adds regarding his own practice: 'I return to their poetry to get brushed up, to get the cobwebs knocked out of me. It always seems fresh and dynamic and exciting and unpredictable. Association is at the base of what I do' (Rossi 2009). Young also notes the importance to his work of the so-called New York School of Poets – a term that began to be used in America in 1961 – and in particular, John Ashbery (b. 1927), Frank O'Hara (1926-1966), and Kenneth Koch (1925-2002), to whom *Elegy on Toy Piano* is dedicated.

and reincarnated cartoon duck, for instance, points to the attempted establishment of a self that might gain a feeling of mastery over death and absence in the space of the elegy. Furthermore, when Young focuses explicitly on the self, he does not appear merely in the shape of an unstable and fragmented 'I', but also as a more defined poetic alter ego. In the poem 'Avalanche Garden', for example, 'Dean Young' meets his fate 'in the Amphitheater while attempting | to rappel without a top rope anchor' (2005: 6); and in 'Halflives of Youngonium', the poet imagines his own death and decomposition in an 'inferno' while 'wearing the bride's underpants' (2005: 14).

Is Young's emotional and physical distancing of the other – *Looney Tunes* character Daffy Duck is a case in point – an attempt to subvert the overtakelessness of the dead? That is to say, poetry that fashions fantastical scenarios of annihilation might be intended to diminish the reality of death and the irredeemable absence of the other in a way that undermines the deleterious effects of loss. Does Young demonstrate that, if death can be displaced in the elegy by an absurd unreality, then the stark reality of overtakelessness – and its capacity to confound the elegist's desire for a full retrieval of the other – will be suppressed in a way similar to that in which Carson imagines her personal grief might be effaced? In his depiction of a cartoonish other, or an other who is an anonymised representative of the human race, Young reveals that a more precise attention is being directed elsewhere – and that the elegist's inability to forge a satisfying and lasting connection with the dead is founded as much on a disconnection with, and loss of, the self as it is on the loss and absence of the other. What inhabits Young's poetry is a self-reflexiveness about mortality that becomes apparent even when he is notionally attending to the demise and disintegration of the other:

Sad humans. You start out grasping
at something you can't see
and stay that way. It doesn't matter
if you're made of cardboard and glitter
or celestial exhale, you've been out in the rain
too long.

(2005: 54)

In these opening lines from 'Lives of the Mortals', Young makes a general point about human failings that reverts implicitly to the self – the elegist's attempt to secure a hold on the amorphous dead recalls Mary Jo Bang's frustrated efforts to reach her dead son

and Carson's encounter with the resistant muteness of her brother. The positioning of 'grasping' and 'see' as line-endings – on the edge of an impenetrable blankness – reinforces the impression of a poet contemplating his own 'sad' pursuit of the absent other. In the third sentence of the above extract, Young's apparent instinct to deflate vanity acts as a bathetic reminder that mortality is no respecter of wealth or privilege. But more significantly, Young fashions a link between the disintegration of the self – lofty ambitions dampened by grim reality to the point where everything ceases to 'matter' – and the physical decomposition of 'matter', regardless of whether it is 'cardboard and glitter | or celestial exhale'. The second-person pronoun 'you' shifts its attachment from 'sad humans' to the inadequate poet, struggling to reach an understanding not only of the other, but also of the self.

In Chapter 1, Susan Howe foregrounds an ethical approach to the other that prioritises the preservation of otherness as a guard against the assimilation of the other into the self. However, Young might be responding to a quite different elegiac demand – that the self should gain precedence over the other – and, in the process, he indicates that the elegy may be characterised by a deeply inlaid seam of selfishness. If this is the case, what can be said to constitute Young's particular strain of self-interest, given the strongly implied incorporation of the self in his collective grouping of sad humans? Could this be described as a variety of narcissism, even though Young appears to be more preoccupied with his own failings, 'grasping | at something you can't see', rather than an expression of vanity? Given these questions, it is worth returning briefly to Denise Riley's *Words of Selves*, discussed in Chapter 2, and to a point in Riley's text where the author is keen to separate Narcissus 'from his recent adhesions of 'narcissism'' (2000: 93), in particular those established by Sigmund Freud,[2] and instead stresses the 'self-knowledge' (2000: 109) of Ovid's anti-hero:

> Although […] he was compelled by Freud to undergo […] metamorphosis into the emblem of his concept of narcissism, Narcissus' original mythological dilemma was profoundly different from that sketched in that familiar modern characterology. Narcissus suffered not error but horror. No ignorance through

[2] Freud's 'On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914)' begins: 'The term narcissism is derived from clinical description and was chosen by Paul Näcke [German psychiatrist, 1851-1913] in 1899 to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated – who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities' (1984c: 65). The OED defines narcissism as 'self-love, extreme vanity'.

> vanity tormented him at the last but rather his horrified and transfixing knowledge of the true nature [of] what he loved.
>
> (2000: 110)

Riley's partial redemption of Narcissus from his later reductive associations with vanity sheds light on Young's frequent positioning of the self at the centre of his own ruminations. To develop Riley's argument in the context of Young's work, it could be said that Young details the experience of 'error' in his exploration of his personal and poetic failings and ultimately arrives at 'horror' in the resulting destruction and decomposition of the self that is imagined in 'Halflives of Youngonium'. Throughout *Elegy on Toy Piano*, the poet encounters the 'horrified and transfixing knowledge' of his own inadequacy. It appears that he is all too aware of the kind of vanity – the idea of oneself, for instance, as being 'made of […] celestial exhale' – that can act as a violent disturbance to the sense of self when such vanity is shattered.

The personal upheaval that accompanies the accumulation of self-knowledge is reflected in the violently disruptive poetic style of 'Lives of the Mortals', where sense and context appear unstable:

My ankle hurts. I can't program my VCR.
Oh, my friend, I have lied to you.
It's only the minor wounds alcohol
can purify. If only they weren't mostly
water like carrots, dirty-tasting.
An arm goes through a neck-hole.
What's that falling from the window?

(2005: 54)

There is an apparent disjunction between the speaker's thoughts and observations that is emphasised by the poet's succession of short, end-stopped statements. Does the speaker's 'lie' relate to the revelation that appears in the following sentence? And what might be the missing narrative that informs the ambiguous statement, 'it's only the minor wounds alcohol | can purify'? To what or whom does 'they' refer in the reflection, 'if only they weren't mostly | water like carrots, dirty-tasting', and how can any possible logical progression be determined from this sentence to the next: 'An arm goes through a neck-hole'? Finally, how does the poet then arrive at his abrupt and apparently random observation: 'What's that falling from the window?'? There is an

apparent arbitrariness to the images in Young's lines that results in a series of sharp deviations from any semblance of narrative that might be established.

Given its apparent incoherence, this particular passage from 'Lives of the Mortals' appears to intersect with Wim Tigges's general classification of nonsense – that it demonstrates 'the impossibility to satisfactorily interpret the images in their connotations and associations' (1988: 119). The complaint, 'my ankle hurts', is followed immediately by the sentence, 'I can't program my VCR', which in turn appears to bear no immediate resemblance or logical preface to 'Oh, my friend, I have lied to you'. In Young's work, the frequent movement from apparent sense to seeming nonsense activates numerous points of breakdown that might also illuminate the dynamic of a frustrated search for coherence and completion in the poet's attempted estimation of the self. The search for a coherent vision of the self might echo the elegist's repeated search for the irretrievable other, where what is permanently beyond the scope and accomplishment of the poet accelerates the desire to grasp what is out of reach.

However, in a discussion of Young's work, Tony Hoagland claims that, although 'Young's poems contain all kinds of gaps, discontinuities, and illogical swerves, […] they are not dissociative' (2009: 33). In light of this argument, it is possible to identify in Young's apparent disjunctions an undercurrent of self-implication. A notion of the everyday limits of the self, both physical and emotional, is followed by a piece of slapstick – 'an arm goes through a neck-hole' – that recalls the act of 'grasping | at something you can't see' from the beginning of Young's poem. The arm gropes blindly for its correct place, but ultimately emerges into the nothingness of thin air, a moment of human error that is comic, but that also resonates with the sadness of the opening lines of 'Lives of the Mortals' – a strain of self-deprecation that runs throughout Young's work. Hoagland adds that '[i]n Young's poems, the self is […] the representative human soul who aspires, stumbles, suffers' (2009: 33), thus reinforcing the argument that the 'you' that is imagined in an act of hopeless grasping mutates from an identification with sad humans to the elegist himself. Moreover, Young's displacement of the self from 'I' to 'you' denotes his own explicit detachment from the self even as he attempts to configure its presence.

Notions of aspiration, stumbling, and suffering are drawn together in Young's question, 'what's that falling from the window?', which remains unanswered, so that whatever is falling remains in a permanent condition of downward, death-bound motion throughout the space of the poem. The poem itself, a window on human existence and its many divergences and disappointments, also descends inexorably towards its conclusion – until the final lines when Young's language evaporates, reflecting the vulnerability of both the self and the elegy:

If only.
And that's all the further that sentence goes,
a dependent clause with nothing to depend on,
a ladder with nothing to prop against
but clouds
which are a form of emptiness
made opaque.

(2005: 55)

Questions are raised about how the elegist will fare in his encounter with the other when not only does his language fall short in an expression of regret at its own inadequacy, 'if only', but the poet is also prompted to elegise his own syntax with a linguistic epitaph: 'And that's all the further that sentence goes'. The intangible other – 'emptiness | made opaque' – mingles with the ineffable self in the void that is described and created by the elegy.

In this chapter, I will examine the implications for an elegist whose attention to the self leads to a recognition of fragmentation and disintegration that parallels the shattering of the pursued other. How can the elegist begin to negotiate with the overtakelessness of the dead when he is preoccupied with a self that appears as unreachable as the elegised other? I will show the ways in which Young foregrounds the bathetic breaking apart of the self, prior to the decomposition of the poet's alter ego 'Youngonium', who acquires an altered existence that emanates from the self, yet is unrecognisable and unassimilable. But, first, I will examine Young's efforts to gain control of the scene of elegy by the fashioning of a poetic world that appears specifically constructed to play safely with death. Can the elegist achieve mastery of death and absence – and a more cohesive sense of self – by effecting an imaginative release of the other from the heavy constraints of overtakelessness?

Playing Dead: Separation from the Self

Young's work is suffused with a sense of playfulness – apparently ludicrous digressions and flights of fantasy regularly throw the narrative off course. The poet appears to unveil a logical route, but he then either diverts the reader down a syntactical cul-de-sac or executes a sudden sleight of hand so that the pathway itself seems to vanish. In a chattily intimate voice, Young mingles apparently frivolous material with poignant reflection to produce a kaleidoscopic landscape that incorporates everything from artistic movements, musicians, and former presidents to snack products and TV shows. Michael C. Leong argues that the poet's aim in *Elegy on Toy Piano* is 'to engage the elegiac as well as the lighthearted' (2005), and Young is assisted in this undertaking by a fondness for play that appears to give scope not only to negotiate spectacular 'smashups' (Hoagland 2009: 29), but also to depict equally imaginative reincarnations. In 'Glory', Young's subject is a TV broadcast of the cartoon show *Looney Tunes*, and he enters what appears at first to be familiar comic territory:

My remote, where is it? Awful things
have happened to Daffy Duck.
Was that the cause or result of his daffiness?
His bill blasted to the back of his head.
His eyes bounced around.
Deep inside his male-feathered brain
is the need to fuck or fuck up
everything beautiful, even the Parthenon.
Yet he returns again and again from what
would kill and make inedible
an ordinary duck.
Is this too a power of daffiness?

(2005: 5)[3]

As Leong notes, the elegiac and the lighthearted jostle for attention in a world of chaotic animation, where Daffy Duck's 'bill' is 'blasted to the back of his head', and 'his eyes bounced around'. In the hermetically sealed world of the cartoon, 'awful things | have happened to Daffy Duck', but the animator can take his subject and destroy it, safe in the knowledge that it will return unscathed 'from what | would kill and make inedible |

[3] *Looney Tunes* is a series of animated cartoons produced by Warner Bros. between 1930 and 1969. Daffy Duck made his debut appearance in *Porky's Duck Hunt*, released on 17 April 1937, alongside Porky Pig, Dog, Drunken Fish, and The Guy Upstairs, <http://www.bcdb.com/cartoon/324-Porkys_Duck_Hunt.html> [accessed 9 June 2014].

an ordinary duck'. Can the type of patent unreality that is depicted in a *Looney Tunes* cartoon, where the duck is repeatedly reincarnated, enable the elegist – like the animator – to acquire a sense of mastery that is normally beyond his reach? If death's permanence and opacity is undermined – and therefore distanced – in the space of the elegy, will the elegist feel that a stronger sense of self can be recovered precisely in the act of bringing the chaotic scene of death and destruction under greater control?

In Chapter 2, I noted Mary Jo Bang's imaginative fashioning of the elegised into a cartoonish balloon, 'a flat-face mouse in Mylar' (2007: 66), in order to try and preserve him in a space that might counter the horrifying concrete reality of her adult son plunged into a world of 'addiction catastrophe' (2007: 78). However, in the very act of an attempted capture of her son, the poet confirms that her averted poetic gaze fails to grasp him. But whereas Bang is perhaps more motivated by an acute sense of personal loss to try and fashion her own version of reality – one in which the elegised might be retrievable and tangible – Young's space of play seems more intended as an assembly of the self via the fantastical reassembly of the other.

It is Young's staging of death and reincarnation in the above extract from 'Glory' – a narrative of appearance and disappearance that enables the subject to return continually from apparent destruction – that resonates with Sigmund Freud's observations about an aspect of a child's play that held particular interest for Freud in its demonstration of a repeated activity. In what ways can Freud's account of the 'fort-da' game be applied to the work of the elegist – specifically, Young's creation of a space of play in order to manage more actively his response to death?[4]

According to Freud, in the fort-da game a child responds to the absence of his mother by repeatedly throwing away his toys, and in particular 'a wooden reel', so that the toy disappears ('*fort*'/'gone'), before making it reappear ('*da*'/'there') by pulling on the piece of string which is attached to the reel. Freud makes the point that 'the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety', despite the fact that 'the greater pleasure was attached to the second act', the

[4] In William Watkin's reading of Freud's fort-da passage, which appears in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)', Watkin describes Freud's account as 'an important literary piece, the key literature of loss of the modern era' (2004: 162).

return of the object. Freud's interpretation of the significance of this game for the child is that the child achieves a degree of control over the situation of his mother's absence by assuming an active rather than a passive role: 'At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it […] as a game, he took on an *active* part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery' (1984a: 284-85).

On the basis of Freud's interpretation of the fort-da game, it may be construed that the elegist, in a similar fashion to the animator, sets in motion the game of elegy – that is, he achieves 'mastery' over an unpleasant and uncontrollable encounter with death by actively initiating absence. If the elegist enacts loss and takes an active role in its performance, then he might feel that at least within the parameters of his creative space he will achieve some measure of control over the event of death and make the dead more retrievable. The elegist is able to create a space of play by making a subject disappear, knowing that he can then make it return within the same imaginary space.

However, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen revises Freud's assessment of the fort-da game when he argues that rather than the wooden reel representing the object (the mother), it actually represents the subject – that is, the child himself – so that when the child throws away the wooden reel, he is treating it 'the way his mother treats him'. Borch-Jacobsen claims that, contrary to Freud's interpretation of the fort-da game, it is not the object that is in play here, but the subject (that is, the self), and that 'by throwing his toys away he is not so much sacrificing the mother as himself: he himself is drawing away from himself by playing the mother's role' (1988: 33).[5] Borch-Jacobsen argues that the child's separation from the self takes place at the very point when he is trying to assert his independence:

> The child is playing at being his mother, and in so doing, *identifying* with her; he loses himself in the very gesture through which he is attempting to constitute himself as a proper subject, an autonomous, free, independent, and active subject.
>
> (1988: 33)

[5] Borch-Jacobsen (b.1951) became a leading figure in the so-called 'Freud Wars' of the 1980s and 1990s, which debated Freud's legacy. Following *The Freudian Subject* (Macmillan: 1988), key texts by Borch-Jacobsen include: *Le Livre Noir de la Psychanalyse: Vivre, Penser et Aller Mieux Sans Freud* (Editions Les Arènes: 2010), with Catherine Meyer, Jean Cottraux, Didier Pleux, and Jacques Van Rillaer; and *The Freud Files: An Inquiry into the History of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge University Press: 2012), with Sonu Shamdasani.

That is to say, the child appears to take an active role by becoming the mother, but in the very act of mimesis – the child's identification with the mother – he is losing a part of his self in a process that Borch-Jacobsen describes as 'passive identification […] with the active pole of the scene' (1988: 33). Further, within the terms of the fort-da game as Borch-Jacobsen sees it, the subject – the child himself – is thrown away, and therefore takes the passive role. The child may be described as performing an active role in that he 'puts himself into play' (1988: 35), but he is ultimately passive because his role involves a separation from the self, and because the self – the subject – is discarded by the mother, whom Freud, according to Borch-Jacobsen, interprets as the 'desired object' (1988: 32).

Borch-Jacobsen's repositioning of the subject and the object in the fort-da game counters Freud's suggestion of a unified, active self making an attempt to achieve mastery of a situation over which he previously lacked control. Instead, the self is fractured – in Borch-Jacobsen's words, the child 'loses himself' rather than gaining a stronger sense of identity and autonomy. Borch-Jacobsen's analysis of the fort-da game allows a more nuanced view of what, given Freud's earlier interpretation, might have appeared to be a more straightforward case of the elegist attempting to gain mastery over mortality. Furthermore, according to Borch-Jacobsen's argument, it is possible that the poet has a blind spot with regard to this separation taking place, precisely because he has effected a detachment from the self in a space of play.

In attempting an active withdrawal into a slapstick world of repeated reincarnation so as to make death more manageable, does Young leave himself at risk of a passive 'drawing away from himself', as Borch-Jacobsen puts it? In the extract from 'Glory', above, the elegiac material stands at a double remove from the self: the observation of the death of a cartoon duck via the medium of a television set, an artificial window on a fantasy-laden world. But when the speaker poses the question, 'my remote, where is it?', he reveals by means of the possessive 'my' a further remove – the remoteness of the self from what is in any case a fictional demise. To use the TV remote control in order to switch channels demonstrates a level of distraction on the part of the speaker, whose intention may be to divert attention away from what is being played out on the screen, but who ultimately occupies the passive role of the unengaged observer. This is a notion

with particular relevance for the elegy, given the emotional remoteness that might result for the individual consumer in a country where a diet of constant TV has long included the mass-production of death. Almost forty years ago, David Stannard pointed out:

> [M]ost Americans today […] do not see a dead body until well into adulthood, and may *never* witness the actual process of dying – though virtually every day of their lives finds them encountering two-dimensional *representations* of death on television and in the press.
>
> (1977: 193)

For the speaker in Young's poem, the search for 'my remote' is also a search for emotional remoteness, a level of distance from death – such as is described by Stannard – in order to make this event safe for personal consumption. But the speaker's questioning, 'where is it?', regarding his remote – or more specifically, his own detachment – indicates that an internal conflict is further complicated by the idea that the elegist's own distance from death, with the attendant fracturing of the self, is not always so easily accessed or accommodated – precisely *because of* the loss of the self. In other words, how can a fractured self possibly devise a way of becoming coherent and emotionally resilient when it is potentially not even aware of the fact that it is becoming fragmented?

When Young poses a question about the fictional immortality of Daffy Duck – 'is this […] a power of daffiness?' – he implies that it is only by acting 'daffy' within the unreal world of the elegy that conventional expectations concerning death and destruction can be blown apart.[6] So, for Young to speculate about 'a power of daffiness' is in one sense a recognition of the feeling of control that the elegist might gain by the creation of an absurd world; but if this authority – or mastery, as Freud puts it – is garnered through playing the fool, then it diminishes such mastery by demonstrating that control is too easily won. If the elegist contrives daffiness in order to make death and absence more manageable, then the self will be sacrificed in the very act of grasping for what appears to be mastery. As Borch-Jacobsen remarks in his revision of Freud's interpretation of the fort-da game, the child may be attempting to secure his autonomy 'by throwing his toys away', but 'he is not so much sacrificing the mother as himself' (1988: 33).

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[6] According to the OED, the word 'daffy', meaning 'silly; mildly eccentric', derives from the noun 'daff', which is defined as 'a person deficient in sense or spirit; a simpleton; a coward'.

When Young reflects on the 'awful things' that 'have happened to Daffy Duck', his question, 'was that the cause or result of his daffiness?', is also directed at himself. If the elegist is confronted by the 'awful things' that constitute external reality, is his only alternative to sacrifice the self and adopt the enforced and potentially passive role of poetic jester in order to manage death and absence? Or, is it possible for the poet to occupy a space that permits an amalgamation of both inner *and* outer reality – a harmonious mingling of subjective and objective material – in order to retain control of the scene of elegy and the self? And how might such a space be assembled?

Entering the 'Edge-World'

In 'Glory', Young fashions a poetic space that interweaves elements of fantasy and reality: images of frequent and graphic violence are funnelled into a domestic environment via a televised animation show, *Looney Tunes*; the subject is a cartoon duck that returns repeatedly from apparently devastating physical injury; Daffy Duck himself is an anthropomorphic creature, complete with recognisable human posture and a distinctive lisp. In another iconic American cartoon show – *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*, a cartoon-within-a-cartoon that features during episodes of *The Simpsons* – the violence reaches an even more extreme level as Itchy the mouse repeatedly annihilates Scratchy the cat, prompting former *The Simpsons* director David Silverman to observe:

> It's an ironic commentary on cartoon mayhem in the sense that it's taken to a more realistic level. The kids on *The Simpsons* are laughing at it, and we're laughing too, but part of what you're laughing at is the over-the-top excessiveness of the violence.
>
> (Heintjes 2008)[7]

Certainly, there is humour to be mined from a TV show where the depiction of violence is so extreme that it departs from a general impression of reality – especially in view of the fact that its protagonists are a pair of anthropomorphic animals. But what sort of creative space might enable the elegist to combine realism and patent unreality, such as is indicated in Silverman's observation, so that graphic disintegration might be repeatedly followed by playful reincarnation? There are insights to be gained into such a space – where subjective and objective realities are allowed to coexist – via the work of

[7] *The Simpsons*, which made its American television debut in 1987, is an adult animated sitcom created by Matt Groening. *The Itchy & Scratchy Show* first appeared in 1988.

paediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, who considered the importance of the 'transitional object' in child development – specifically, 'the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity' (1958: 234). In his paper, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena [1951]', Winnicott observes the significance of the lapse of time that exists between infants' use of 'fist, fingers, thumbs in stimulation of the oral erotogenic zone' and their eventual attachment to a more permanent toy such as a teddy bear or a doll (1958: 229).[8]

In this temporal space, writes Winnicott, the child will begin to use their 'first *Not-Me* possession' – a fragment of blanket or sheet, for instance – that represents the passage from subjective to objective perception, and which Winnicott calls the 'transitional object'. Such an object is in turn part of an overall 'intermediate area of experience' that Winnicott terms 'transitional phenomena' (1958: 229-30). The intermediate area, adds Winnicott, 'is necessary for the initiation of a relationship between the child and the world' (1958: 241), allowing the child to manage its relation to the real and the unreal – what exists in the external world as opposed to the internal world of its own fantasies and play. The significant fact for the child – as well as for the application of Winnicott's observations to Young's work – is that, as Winnicott remarks, in the 'intermediate area of *experiencing*, […] inner reality and external life both contribute' (1958: 230).

What could be termed Young's 'intermediate area' of experience is to juxtapose brutal destruction – of the sort that might take place in 'external life' – with the playful repeated reincarnation of Daffy Duck. This creative space allows the elegist, like the child of Winnicott's study, to manage his own relation to the inner world and the outer world, and it becomes the elegist's own equivalent of Winnicott's 'resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related'. Winnicott adds that he is 'staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby's inability and growing ability to recognize and accept reality', and that consequently he is 'studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion' (1958: 230).

[8] Winnicott's paper was published in 1953 in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34, pp. 89-97, before publication in *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (1958). The original hypothesis of the paper also appears in a collection of Winnicott's essays, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge: 2005), pp. 1-34.

The gap between Young's 'inability and […] ability to recognize and accept reality' is played out in a poem that thrusts into its space the illusory image of an animated duck suffering a graphic demise. As part of an overall study of media violence, Steven J. Kirsh discusses the effects of cartoon violence on the viewer and remarks that 'cartoons *sanitize* the outcomes of violence. That is, victims are rarely shown suffering in realistic pain' (2006: 161), a crucial feature that, Kirsh adds, removes the element of 'personal threat' to the viewer:

> Given that comedic cartoons deviate significantly from reality, and it is therefore difficult for the viewer to make a connection between the onscreen violence and a personal threat of violence, the level of violence associated with the viewed media is diminished.
>
> (2006: 162)

Therefore, the details of a violent death can be addressed in the space of the poem without the painful consequences that might be attached to a death that is part of Winnicott's 'outer reality'. With this in mind, to what extent does the poem allow the poet to inhabit simultaneously the apparently discrete worlds of inner reality and external life, so that what makes up the resulting space is neither the subjective nor the objective, but a mingling of the two?

John Wilkinson explores the idea that a poem can fashion a particular space wherein an 'imaginary' and an 'ordinary' reality can coexist, rather than it being assumed – as is often the case, according to Wilkinson – that 'poetry and the imaginary disrupt' what he describes as 'ordinary reality and ordinary language' (2007: 197). Instead, writes Wilkinson, a poem can perform 'the evocation and enactment of a radical hybridity, pulling together ways of thinking about the world' that have until now been 'falsely separated' (2007: 196). By 'radical hybridity', Wilkinson means the process by which 'inner life' is 'pleated with the outside, social world, to engender […] simultaneous connection and disconnection' (2007: 210).

For Young, the poem enables the pleating of his 'inner life' of continuous reassembly of the apparently destroyed duck and the 'outside, social world' of actual violence and disintegration, so that both are allowed to coexist in the space that he creates. It is a way of addressing elegiac material, but without the threat – emotional or physical – that might be ushered in by external reality. Nevertheless, adds Wilkinson, the

phenomenological skin that the poem becomes is not an impenetrable barrier to, or 'deviation from', external reality because, according to Wilkinson, the poetic space can create 'a thick, impure and hybrid incorporation, a porous skinscape which is neither objective nor subjective' (2007: 197-98). The porosity of Young's elegy allows the 'subjective' nature of the poetic content, Daffy's comical repeated destruction, to coexist with objective material – the recognition of Wilkinson's ordinary reality, that what happens to Daffy 'would kill and make inedible | an ordinary duck'.

The enabled space, such that allows Young to incorporate inner and external reality, is termed by Wilkinson 'an edge-world' (2007: 198) that in Young's case is neither entirely fantasy-laden, nor wholly imbued with ordinary reality. In this sense, a poem can occupy a position that is, Wilkinson remarks, 'not a division', but 'a hybrid on the margin of inside and outside' (2007: 202) that allows the free exchange of subjective and objective content. Young's particular 'edge-world' is one that is made up of both the elegist's subjective reality, an apparent reincarnation in the space of the poem, and the objective reality that affirms the death of the elegised by the very fact that the elegised is occupying the elegiac space. It is notable that Young might attempt to inhabit the sort of marginal, unclassifiable territory that represents his version of Anne Carson's 'space between languages' (McNeilly 2003: 14). As noted in Chapter 3, Carson's term for the amorphous area in which words refuse a neat transition between languages finds a parallel in the practice of elegy where the text attempts to reach across the divide between the word and the plenitude of the elegised other. If Young attempts to locate the self in an edge-world that is, according to Wilkinson, neither 'inside' nor 'outside' – and in terms of its 'hybrid' identity appears to bear a resemblance to the unfathomable territory of the dead – then is he at risk of making the self as unstable and unreachable as the elegised other?

Wilkinson remarks that such a poetic space is problematised by the recognition that it 'might support (but does not at all guarantee)' the pleating of inner reality and outside world (2007: 198) – he attributes the lack of failsafe to the fact that 'it isn't *simple* to refresh the edge-world and too much conspires to obliterate it' (2007: 210). Young appears to be as conscious of the threat posed by such obliteration to the space of his own poetry, as he is of the threat of violent destruction in the outside world. Winnicott remarks, above, that he is 'studying the substance of *illusion*' (1958: 230), and, although

his primary area of study in this respect is the behaviour of a small child, he adds that 'the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, […] no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality' (1958: 240). For Young, the role of '*illusion*' – a word that derives from the Latin *ludere*, meaning 'play' – is significant in terms of its enabling the elegist to create a space of play via a TV transmission of *Looney Tunes*. But it is also worth noting that his poetry might have an illusory effect on the reader – and indeed on the self – as a tonal shift in 'Glory' demonstrates such a playful space to be deceptive:

Deep inside his male-feathered brain
is the need to fuck or fuck up
everything beautiful, even the Parthenon.

(2005: 5)

Suddenly, the relatively safe space of the *Looney Tunes* cartoon is transformed into more unstable territory by the contamination of graphic adult language and behaviour. The inappropriateness of a cartoon character displaying an aggressive strand of maleness ruffles the surface of Young's poem as the cartoonish blastings and bouncings reveal characteristics that afflict not just Daffy Duck, but perhaps also the poet himself – inside his own 'male-feathered brain', Young suggests, is a self that feels the need to 'fuck up' the playfulness of his poetry. Jean-Paul Sartre remarks, with important implications for Young's poetry, that although 'play' is 'an activity […] for which man himself sets the rules', the 'freedom' a man feels, that is an essential prerequisite of play, 'could just as well be his anguish' (1969: 580-81). For Young, there might be a perceptible anxiety in his own freedom to engage in play, such that he is driven to destroy the innocence of a cartoon character that he has allowed to cavort within the space of his poem. In the process of self-sabotage, Young detonates both the child's world of safe violence and his own indulgence in the language and actions of that world.

The juxtaposition of the term 'fuck up' – which draws attention both through its explicitness and its position as a line-ending – with 'the Parthenon' sullies the beautiful with the base in a way that parallels the invasive effects of death and decomposition on bodily matter. Young's use of coarse slang serves to destabilise both the playfulness of the poem and a notion of the stability of the self in an edge-world that is designed to facilitate a sense of mastery over a chaotic scene, but ultimately displays its vulnerability

to the outer reality that it attempts to regulate. Young's language acts as a bathetic reminder of what might be his own fuck-up – the serious error of a self that presents a barrier to its own understanding. In what ways does Young's bathos contribute to a disintegration of the self as it moves to a space beyond the reach of the poet?

'He does not Hover': The Role of Bathos

In the above extract from 'Glory', the descent and disintegration of a magnificent Greek temple is figured not only as a result of an imagined assault by a cartoon duck, but also as a direct consequence of the poet's own language: Daffy's 'male-feathered brain' may equally be that of the poet himself, consciously or unconsciously subject to the whims of a destructive impulse that denigrates the beautiful; a desire for the downfall of the elaborate image or the high-flown thought. Tony Hoagland notes in Young's work a distinctive feature of 'ironic tonal deflation' (2009: 30), which acquires an extra resonance of self-implication in the above extract through a sudden and unexpected change of register from the cerebral – 'deep inside his male-feathered brain' – to the coarse, 'the need to fuck or fuck up | everything beautiful'. The deflation of the self is both implied and enacted by the poet's own language. In 'Lives of the Mortals', Young executes the descent of his subject through form and language, notionally as a means of addressing human shortcomings:

> You try
> to protect your son and he takes up hang-
> gliding but he's no butterfly,
> he plummets, he does not hover.

(2005: 54)

The tension generated by the action of 'hang- | gliding' is heightened by Young's form: emphasis is piled onto 'hang-', as 'your son' is effectively suspended in the open space of the line-ending; this is immediately followed by Young's swift and blunt deflation in the alliterative release of 'but he's no butterfly, | he plummets, he does not hover'. Young's language and syntax bring the 'he' down after he hovers briefly on an updraught of consecutive line-endings, 'try', and 'hang-'. The successive 'h' sounds of 'he', 'hang-', 'he's', 'he', 'he', and 'hover' have the effect of increasingly desperate exhalations to keep

the son afloat in the air, but he is weighed down by the heavy sounds of 'but' and 'plummets'.

Young suggests that the type of delicacy and intricacy distinctive to the butterfly is out of reach of the poet – rather, the tone and the content of his poem are flattened by the register of the final line; the sentence is terminated by the full point that follows 'hover', as if the word itself hits the ground with a thump. In this sense, the poem itself brings about the downfall of the high-flown hang-glider and reveals its own falling away – and the falling away of the self – in the final phrase, 'he does not hover'. The notion of the elevated self, in control of his own language and the scene of elegy, is deflated by an abrupt descent and the ensuing silence of the end-stopped line-ending. Further, the idea that the self might be enabled to hover in an edge-world – neatly suggested, above, by the enjambed word 'hang- | gliding' – that would enable death to be managed more successfully, is shown to be unstable and vulnerable to its own disintegration. The poet's own potential ostentatiousness is also undermined in 'Evening Primrose' when Young ruminates on the effects of decay:

> Look at this tree
> that was beautiful when its blossoms
> twittered in the leftward breeze but
> then went through a bark-scab, leaf-
> splotched phase but now is beautiful again
> albeit kinda spooky.
>
> (2005: 4)

The potential effect on the reader of a falling away of language – if it is regarded in terms of a contrast between a high-flown poetic register and lightly humorous slang – is a poetic pin-prick to puncture pomposity, which has a certain pleasure. Where the Romantic elegist might pursue the 'leftward breeze' and mine all the grim potentialities of 'bark-scab' and the condition of being 'leaf- | splotched', Young debunks his own language: to describe the effects of disease as 'kinda spooky' is both amusing and levelling. Hoagland remarks that 'Young frequently reminds the reader of the textual nature of the poem, of the artifice of poeticized emotion' (2009: 33); in the above extract, the poet deflates one voice – the 'poeticized emotion' of 'blossoms' that 'twittered in the leftward breeze' – with a quite different voice, the American vernacular 'kinda spooky'. However, Young illustrates that even his own apparently unpoeticised

speech is unavoidably poeticised by its transition from spoken voice to the textual space of the poem. The sound of Young's speech is absorbed into what Hoagland calls the poem's 'textual nature' and therefore leaves itself as open to the accusation of artifice as the description of the tree's 'bark-scab, leaf- | splotched phase'.

In an effort, perhaps, to subvert his own vulnerability to the artifice of poeticised emotion, Young imagines the struggle against death as a kind of hippy protest in 'Ghost Grease':

> What's the worst
> that can happen? Jail, terrible pain followed
> by death? Been there, seen the demonstration
> where the objectors get smashed and drug out,
> unconscious from the struggle
> but some just stroll through the smoke
> to meet a grade school teacher so go figure.

(2005: 36)

Young's conversational style and informal language take the heat out of 'terrible pain' and 'death' by picturing the sufferers – or in this instance, 'the objectors' – 'get smashed and drug out' so that the power of death, and the overtakelessness of the dead, is potentially defused by what could be a delirious, drug-fuelled anti-Vietnam march. But the bathetic moment arrives at the end of the above passage, where a near-death or afterlife moment is imagined as a 'stroll through the smoke | to meet a grade school teacher'. The fact that the speaker has 'been there, seen the demonstration' does not in any way make him better equipped to either describe what happens in the sequence of events leading to death or to understand the nature and constitution of what encloses the dead following their disappearance. The bathos of a meeting with a grade school teacher is in itself a bathetic moment for a poet who is trying to figure out his own response to death and absence.

One potential impact of death on the elegist is that language falters, as Mary Jo Bang discovers in Chapter 2, or bottoms out so that what confronts the poet is 'kinda spooky'; alternatively, the landscape of death is so indistinct that the elegist is left grasping at sense and coherence. Ultimately, Young continues in 'Ghost Grease', the self falls short:

Now that my ghost life's underway,

everyone's trying to contact me
as if I know who's out, who's in,
as if I've got a clue about the yen.

(2005: 36)

Young's phrase 'my ghost life' transposes the self and the other, so that 'everyone's trying to contact *me*' (my emphasis) – in this way, the self is repositioned as unreachable other. Further, 'my ghost life' might describe an elegist's pursuit of the dead in work that is itself inhabited by numerous different voices – as discussed in Chapter 2, the invocation of the poetic 'I' ushers in a self that is constituted by multiple identities; Young's question of 'who's out, who's in' indicates a self that is unsure of its own configuration at any particular moment. The final bathetic note in the above extract is struck by a neat pun on 'yen': the self as ghost is peeved by the fact that the living are more concerned with acquiring inside information about the stockmarket than they are with unveiling the innate mysteries of overtakelessness. More seriously, the speaker implies he has no 'clue' about the yen of the dead – that is, their particular 'yearning', to apply the OED's definition of the word in its colloquial sense. Nor can he connect with the self in such a way that will articulate what might lie behind the elegist's own interminably renewed craving to reach the dead and pull them back into the space of the poem.

In 'Ghost Gust', the speaker imagines himself in what appears to be a timeless afterlife where what might be the other fades in and out of view:

You there, I think I know you
or did once or someone who answered
to your name. We were inseparable
like two sides of a page on which was written
an argument against dust,
how everything becomes it.

(2005: 23)

The descent of language follows the apparent hopefulness of the recognition that begins the passage, 'you there, I think I know you', which even in its uncertainty at least possesses the immediacy of the present tense. But the repetition of 'or' in the following line enacts a diminishment of hope, as recognition moves into the past, 'or did once', and then casts doubt on recognition itself, 'or someone who answered | to your name'.

This is a dreamlike world where the speaker drifts in and out of recognition, and it is here that Young foregrounds one aspect of the influence of surrealism on his work – specifically, making the self fluid so that different versions of the self can interchange with each other. In the above extract, it appears that the self fractures and divides, so that an imagined dead self encounters the formerly living self in an unspecified landscape. Young's apparent misrecognition, to have perhaps 'once' known the person, 'or someone who answered | to your name', indicates the possibility that different versions of the self are divided by the amorphous frontier between life and death. Whereas in Chapter 3 Anne Carson notes the division between the self and the other in what she terms the 'space between languages', Young observes a self that has itself become fragmented; that is, the self is encountering the overtakelessness of the self.

In her study of the various encounters of the surrealist text, Mary Ann Caws remarks that 'the surrealist self has to take its consciousness from drift. Since we know how shape-shifting works, we might wonder in what shape we will continue' (1997: 22). For the speaker in Young's poem, above, there is the drift in and out of recognition of his own divided self, and the question that Caws raises appears to be particularly pertinent to the elegist's examination of the transition from life to death, where an inclination towards a surrealism-influenced encounter might open up the territory of an imagined afterlife. Caws adds that '[t]o find ourselves, but to find ourselves other, and then still other, this is central to the surrealist enterprise' (1997: 22), and Young might wonder about the potential multiple subdivisions of his self. That is to say, if he were to engage in the pure surrealist pursuit of 'automatic writing' (Breton 1972: 37),[9] he might wonder in what shape he will continue – how his language will appear, and how it will shape his thoughts. But also, if he were to submit to the idea of the self as effectively other, what will be the shape – or shapes – in which he might encounter himself after an imagined death?

In Chapter 2, I noted the ways in which Mary Jo Bang's self divides and subdivides – the significant implications of her 'becoming a new social entity' (Riley 2000: 173) when

[9] André Breton (1896-1966), French poet and writer, known as the founder of surrealism. In 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), Breton defines surrealism: 'Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern' (1972: 26).

she is named a bereaved mother. If, in the scenario suggested by Young's poem, above, the dead self of the speaker has come across a representation of his living self, then the self that 'once […] answered | to your name' appears to be out of reach, the name as inaccessible as this particular version of the self. There is an implied location of the self in 'you there, I think I know you', but this is followed by a bathetic descent into 'or did once' (what Caws would describe as 'to find ourselves other') and finally, 'or someone who answered | to your name' (or in Caws's words, 'then still other').

The idea of being 'inseparable | like two sides of a page' in the above extract appears to move Young's poem into more textual territory: there is inseparability but difference in being two sides of a page in that each side shares the same single piece of paper, but this paper may accommodate discrete narratives or conflicting accounts of the self. There may be continuity, in the running of a poem from one side of the page to the other; however, there may be stark division. If one were to hold the page up to the light, it might be possible to see a vague approximation of the text on the other side. But neither side of the page, or of the self, can be read satisfactorily by perusing the other side of the page. There are elements of crossover – vague recognition, one might say, as when Young's speaker exclaims, 'I think I know you' – but not in sufficient clarity to make the speaker secure in his recognition. As Caws remarks: 'Any of our *others* is already problematic, to say the least, and already potentially lost to the next, whether an other person or the most loved text or belief' (1997: 22).

What is potentially 'problematic' for the elegist is the observation that it is by means of the 'text' that the poet can make 'an argument against dust'; that is to say, the elegy might attempt to counter bodily disintegration – that of the self as well as the other – with the tangibility of the page, a poetic legacy that might offset the disappearance of the poet. But by definition, the elegy is living testament to the absence of the dead: at the very moment that it is making an argument against dust, the elegy makes an argument for dust, 'how everything becomes it'. When Young describes 'two sides of a page', he points to the internal conflict of the elegist – caught in the bathetic moment of admitting the void of death, while inscribing an elegy that might attempt to resist such absence. In 'Ghost Gust', the page and the self are equally inseparable from dust:

Wish I wasn't always this way.
It'd be nice to withstand a cup of tea

and a good cry. Not to reassess
but to come into a clearing
to rust in pieces.

(2005: 23)

There is bathos in an imagined return from ghostly form – not to engage in a complex analysis of his life, but 'to withstand a cup of tea | and a good cry'. Rather than a reassessment of the self, the speaker expresses a desire to 'come into a clearing | to rust in pieces' – the self imagined as exhausted machinery, fracturing in bathetic manner, piece by piece, until nothing remains other than the signs of its own decay. The fact that Young's imagined crumbling takes place 'in *pieces*' (my emphasis) has the supplementary effect of making inseparable the elegist and his work – that is, if the self breaks apart, then the elegy is also subject to the risk of disintegration, along with any facility for elucidation it might offer in an encounter with overtakelessness.

It is also worth noting that Young's apparent fragmentation of the self takes place in a 'clearing', a concept that plays a significant part in Martin Heidegger's analysis of the nature of being:

> That which is can only be, as a being, if it stands within and stands out within what is lighted in this clearing. Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees.
>
> (1971: 53)

In order to understand the implications offered here for Young's notion of a clearing – and what occupies that clearing – it is necessary first to consider Heidegger's use of the term '*Dasein*' and its relation to being. 'Dasein', which means literally 'being (*sein*) there (*da*)' has, Heidegger remarks, 'a special distinctiveness as compared with other entities', which he explains as the fact that 'there is some way in which Dasein understands itself in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly'. He adds: 'It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being*' (1962: 32). To be a human being, according to Heidegger, is to comprehend being; whereas the same is not true of an entity such as a table or a chair.

However, in his account of Heidegger's *Being and Time, Division I*, Hubert L. Dreyfus remarks that each individual human being has a similarly individual experience of the world, of being in the world, since 'we are always in the world by way of being in some specific circumstances' (1991: 163). Dreyfus adds that 'Dasein's there […] is a moving center of pragmatic activity in the midst of a shared world', so that '[e]ach Dasein's *there* is *the* situation as organized around *its* activity. The shared situation is called *the clearing*; being-in-the-clearing is *being-there*'. In order to distinguish '*clearing* as an activity from *the clearing* that results from that activity', Dreyfus uses the example of 'a group of people all working together to clear a field in a forest. There is a plurality of activities of clearing, but all this activity results in only one cleared field' (1991: 164-65). Thus, there is a movement between the individual experience of the 'there' and the shared experience of 'the clearing' – or as it is in Heidegger's original text, '*Lichtung*', a word which, according to Dreyfus, 'means literally a clearing in the forest', indicating 'an open space in which one can encounter objects'. However, Dreyfus adds, '*[l]icht* also means light', suggesting the equation of 'intelligibility with illumination' (1991: 163).

In Young's 'Ghost Gust', above, the poet indicates the 'pragmatic activity' of the self by means of the word 'there' in the line, 'you there, I think I know you', a word that according to Heidegger 'carries in its ownmost Being the character of not being closed off' because 'according to the familiar signification of the word, the 'there' points to a 'here' and a 'yonder'' (1962: 171). For Young, the idea of 'not being closed off' indicates an incomplete self, a notion that is reinforced by the speaker's uncertain observation that 'I think I know you'. In the same poem, Young's 'clearing', which in Heidegger's terms 'guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are', represents a shared, illuminated space wherein '[t]hings show up *in the light of* our understanding of being' (Dreyfus 1991: 163).

The fact that Young is coming 'into a clearing | to rust in pieces' suggests that Young's 'understanding of being' embraces both the fate of the self and the fate of the other, 'those beings that we ourselves are not'. If the word 'rust' is read in this context as a verb, then it appears that the speaker's expectation in arriving at the clearing is that he will undergo a gradual process of decay. But if the word 'rust' is read as a noun, then Young's phrase should rather be understood in the sense that the elegist enters a clearing, and *comes across* pieces of rust, which represent fragments of the self as well as

fragments of the other. Heidegger's world of the clearing is for Young a place of not-being, where what is shared by the self and the other is the corporeal decay that breaks us all into pieces and the overtakelessness that follows. The clearing might also be shared by the elegist and his 'pieces' – the speaker in 'Ghost Gust' reflects bathetically that 'everything's flying apart' (2005: 23), a sentiment that incorporates the idea of an irredeemable disintegration of the self and the work. This raises the question of what is at stake in an imagined decomposition of the self, which Young explores in *Elegy on Toy Piano* in sometimes colourful and unflinching detail.

Poetic Decomposition

As noted in the Introduction to this chapter, Young's frequently irreverent approach to his subject might be intended as a means of neutralising the power of death and of subverting the overtakelessness of the other. The nature of Daffy Duck's demise in 'Glory', for instance, demonstrates a comical debunking of destruction through a depiction of clearly excessive violence that points clearly to its own unreality – not least through its repeated, and reversible, obliteration of an animated creature. Young's treatment of the self in 'Ghost Gust', above, is not quite so cartoonish, but is no less destructive in what the poem imagines for the body of both the self and the work – a process of decay that culminates in a dramatic shattering when everything flies apart.

In a prose piece, Young notes the importance of irreverence – his observation of its potential capacity to 'clear a […] space where new truth may appear' (2010: 80) indicates that his dismantling in 'a clearing' of an imagined self might represent, paradoxically, an act of restorative destruction.[10] That is to say, an undermining of the self might also undermine the unreachability of the self in a way that parallels Young's attempted subversion of the overtakelessness of the other. Does the imagined destruction of the self present a possible solution to the interminable problem of the self that is – like the unassimilable other – unavoidable but cannot be got round? Young proposes the notion that '[t]he irreverent welcomes its own desecration' (2010: 80), suggesting that he

[10] Young opens his passage, entitled 'Stanza Break', with an insight into its inspiration: 'Here are the 750-1,000 words on irreverence the Academy of American Poets asked me to write. I can hear your laughter from here' (2010: 77). According to Young, his prose work *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction*, which includes 'Stanza Break', is less a collection of essays than material compiled from 'seminars I'd given, craft talks, lectures […]. I think of it as a provocation and a sequence of enthusiasms' (Rossi 2009).

might remove barriers to an understanding of the self by exposing the self to aggressive disdain and destruction. In 'Skipping the Reception', Young turns his attention to the self after a mild attack on the other:

I don't really want to meet Burkard.
Just because I like his books.
He's probably disappointing in person.
I know I am. In person you have to commit
to what comes fumping out of your mouth
like popped ketchup.
[…]
The sound of the crash barely reaches us
so it sounds like someone else's problem.
Precious moments of life ebbing away.
What a pathetic thing to say.

(2005: 33)

Young begins with what appears to be shaping up as a criticism of 'Burkard',[11] but which then turns into an opportunity for self-deprecation. The 'popped ketchup' is grotesquely humorous, both for its distinctive aural qualities and the implication that what issues from the self is at best unpalatable, at worst horribly inappropriate. Later in the above extract, when 'the sound of the crash barely reaches us', the distant nature of the collision is matched by the 'pathetic' language offered in response: 'Precious moments of life ebbing away.' The risible sentimentality is – like the ketchup – gloopy, amid Young's demonstration that the elegist is subject to execrable lapses of language, as Mary Jo Bang discovers in Chapter 2. An admission of being 'disappointing' is freighted with the same sense of inadequacy that permeates Young's observations of his poetic alter ego in 'Halflives of Youngonium':

I am wearing the bride's underpants.
I am sensing vegetable soup
in my semisolid state of California
where the children of the inferno
hold out their votive spare change cups
and the armadillos of the inferno
don't have a chance.

(2005: 14)

[11] Young is perhaps referring here to US poet Michael Burkard (b. 1947), whose works include *Envelope of Night: Selected and Uncollected Poems 1966-1990* (Nightboat Books: 2008) and *My Secret Boat: A Notebook of Prose and Poems* (W. W. Norton: 2013).

The poet's alter ego is on shaky ground in a post-apocalyptic wasteland where children are begging for 'spare change'; he is as if caught in a bad dream, 'wearing the bride's underpants' and 'sensing vegetable soup'. The grotesque details of diced matter and a crumbling environment describe a scene of carnage where individuals are indistinguishable or chopped into indecipherable fragments. The apparent disgust at humanity, and the ways in which the human race treats its own, is centred in the senses – the smell and taste of organic decay emanates from images of underpants and soup as the self appears to recoil from the amorphous rotting mass of otherness that he encounters. But the possessive pronoun in Young's phrase '*my* semisolid state' (my emphasis) reveals a strong degree of self-implication that resides in a recognition that Youngonium is himself unstable and an inextricable part of what surrounds him; further, there is a notion that the very experience of feeling disgust is disgusting – that it taints any feeling of primacy that the self might fondly consider it possesses. The illusion of such self-importance is dismantled by Young's syntax – one reading of 'I am sensing vegetable soup | in my semisolid state' shows an acute awareness of his own capacity for disgustingness, the sounds and odours of his own intestines.

To what extent could the imagined inferno and the apparent disintegration of Youngonium be interpreted as a *desired* destruction of the self? In his analysis of the facets and functions of cynicism in contemporary culture, Peter Sloterdijk includes a chapter entitled 'In Search of Lost Cheekiness', in which he laments the 'impudent demands of […] morose societies' and remarks that '[g]ray is the basic color of an age that, for a long time, has again been dreaming secretly about the colorful big bang'. According to Sloterdijk, a repressed desire for wholesale destruction – such as is described by Young's inferno – is inspired by a number of 'vital incapacities' of human existence. Among these, Sloterdijk includes 'the incapacity to express, […] the incapacity to let go' (1987: 127). These two incapacities go some way towards defining the dynamic of elegy: as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, the irresistible appeal of the dead – effectively, what cannot be let go – resides in their positioning as an unavoidable presence that remains ultimately elusive, not least because of the incapacity of language to reach and capture the fullness of the elegised other. If Young encounters comparable incapacities in his attention to the self – that is, if he discovers that the self eludes assimilation and comprehension as resolutely as the other – then what *does* lie within his grasp?

In the face of such incapacities, Sloterdijk writes, there are two alternative courses of action: either to see 'a way out of such relations' – what could be described in the context of Young's predicament as a delicate negotiation with the self – or to take what might be termed the nuclear option:

> Among all these atrophies, one capacity has remained that unerringly sets its sights on what a life grants to itself in the end […]: the capacity […] to work toward circumstances in which, unavoidably, everything will be blown to smithereens with the greatest possible spectacle […]. The barren ego comes to its last feast that melts long-lost passions and impulses together in the final burn-up.
>
> (1987: 127)

Sloterdijk's conception of a capacity that resists atrophy – the ability, ultimately, to destroy incapacity in a spectacular 'final burn-up' – reveals a means for the elegist to restore a sense of agency by initiating the obliteration of the other *and* the self, a scenario where 'everything will be blown to smithereens'. However, following Young's inferno the self does not disappear – rather, it mutates into what appears to be a highly toxic version of itself, 'Youngonium', a being that is part poet, part chemical compound. The name of the poet's alter ego indicates a transformation of the self into an entity that is both recognisable in its emanation from a previously held notion of the self and unrecognisable in its new, unclassifiable form: 'When you die, your new body is entirely symbols. | Love me, love my lilac-valanced isoprene' (2005: 15). Young describes the movement of the dead from corporeal reality to the linguistic 'symbols' of the poem, a representation that confirms through its own body of words and phrases the overtakelessness of the other it is trying to retrieve. Furthermore, Young notes through his depiction of Youngonium – an imagined diminishment and disintegration of the self into symbols – that the self becomes similarly irretrievable in the space of the poem.

Following Young's own poetic version of Sloterdijk's conflagration, his alter ego mutates from corporeal body into a collection of chemical symbols – specifically, isoprene, a volatile, flammable liquid. This is the self re-imagined as a substance that, far from being reduced to an entity that is inert and assimilable – that can perhaps be encompassed – is instead liable to rapid and unpredictable change. Young indicates that the inferno does not entirely obliterate Youngonium. Rather, the various processes of decomposition – in which bacteria and fungi break down the body's tissues and transform the physical being into a cocktail of gases and liquids – enact the mutation of

the self into what Young terms in the title of his poem 'halflives', a form of present absence that parallels the amorphous identity of the elegised other. The self, reimagined as intangible vapour that might at any moment disappear into the atmosphere, becomes as ungraspable as the other.

Even following an attempt to blow the self to smithereens, it remains in Young's poem as an entity that has a half-life – that which, as Anne Carson describes overtakelessness in Chapter 3, 'cannot be avoided or seen to the back of'. Furthermore, it is a self that in Carson's words 'remains beyond' comprehensive knowledge and assimilation. In 'Is This Mic On?', Young writes:

I can't say
I'm afraid of death but I can't say
I'm less afraid of living,
both go on whatever we do like fungus,
which, I must admit, gives me pause.

(2005: 69-70)

Fungus, as a living expression of the processes of decomposition, *goes on*; that is, it takes up residence *on* organic matter and makes organic matter its life source – on which it develops and fruits at the expense of its host. After death, the body effectively digests itself when enzymes begin consuming cells to the point where they rupture and release fluids; the body in its plenitude begins to disintegrate, but what *goes on* is an active process of decomposition – what might be described as a grotesque half-life. In a discussion of bodily disintegration, Jonathan Dollimore observes that '[d]eath is never pure non-being, but is ever-present in life as change and decomposition' (1998: 253-54).[12] Would a perception of 'pure non-being', such as is promised by Sloterdijk's final burn-up and Young's inferno, promise for the poet a fresh clarity of purpose – a relinquishment of the dead that arises from a relinquishment of hope for *retrieval* of the dead?

But the presence 'in life as change and decomposition', observed by Dollimore, shows also a living presence of the dead that might be retrieved – this half-life makes the dead

[12] Dollimore makes his observation in *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* in the context of a discussion of Georges Bataille's remark in 'The History of Eroticism': '[D]eath is that putrefaction, that stench…which is at once the source and the repulsive condition of *life*' (Bataille 1991: II 80).

unavoidable, even as the elegist recognises that a full retrieval is beyond his grasp. Furthermore, this disintegrative half-life of decomposition is hidden from view – it *goes on* in a space that is both recognisably human and beyond the normal capacity of the human gaze. The poetic gaze, meanwhile, is indicated by Young, above, in the repeated phrase, 'I can't say […]', which mutates from its most obvious sense of '*It's not true to say* […]' to an admission of incapacity – the inability to articulate a response to death, which is rooted in the incapacity of the disintegrating 'I', an imagined self, to speak coherently in the poem. What remains active, but concealed, enforces a 'pause' in the elegist's expression. Nor does it seem possible to free the self from the restrictions of its poetic incarnation, despite the poet's assertion in 'Last Words':

> We are human beings, not
> texts. Not loudspeakers or layers of gas.
> Not even jellyfish. Is tranquility
> possible? I want dot dot dot gasp.
> You must dot dot dot gurgle.

(2005: 87)

Young's apparently defiant announcement that 'we are human beings' is undermined by what follows – end-stopped line-endings of 'gas' and 'gasp' ensure that the hissing and escape of vapours into the atmosphere remain prominent precisely because of the poet's lexical manoeuvres. The assertion that we are 'not | texts' is made in a text that foregrounds its own textuality – the visualisation of the last breath of the self is spelt out by 'dot dot dot gasp'; the guttural sound of 'dot dot dot gurgle' represents the submergence of the hoped-for 'tranquility' as the 'I' fashions a final desperate attempt at speech.

In 'Halflives of Youngonium', Young's text appears to relate a narrative of its own demise:

> My tetrahedron is a chiseled meltdown,
> my tv listing. Even my passive construction's
> in a restricted hard hat area.

(2005: 14)

Just as Egyptian architects and workers built the tetrahedral pyramids as tombs for the pharaohs, so the elegist might attempt to construct his grand memorial with the same

studied labour and precision – and in hope of a comparable solidity and permanence. But the elegy becomes in effect a linguistic tomb, where the dead are reduced to symbols and the self is in 'meltdown' – its search for expression and a coherent identity founders on the same absence that characterises the elegised other. The elegist's remoteness from the dead, and from the self, is underlined by the ineffectualness of his poetic 'construction', which declares its own distance from its subject through a passive voice that merely reacts to absence after the event and creates a representation of the dead rather than enabling their return to fullness.

The question arises of how an elegy can survive its own meltdown if ultimately it amounts to no more than the equivalent of a 'tv listing', a record of one death among many that must struggle to locate its individual significance. Or, as Mary Jo Bang finds in Chapter 2, the elegy's instability might be rooted in its own flawed construction – a linguistic figuring of the dead by a subjective self may be as skewed as the images of a listing television set. The half-lives of the poem and the self are interwoven in the final lines of 'Halflives of Youngonium':

All the early investigators were severely burned.
You can only get so close to me.
Even their notebooks have to be
locked in a lead box.

(2005: 15)

Young points to a notion of the self that is not only ungraspable, but is also hazardous – an entity that actively undermines the construction of the elegy in terms of its intrusion in potential negotiations between the elegist and the elegised. What are the implications for the elegy if the poet is preoccupied more with the demands of the self than the demands of the other? And if the self is unstable and incoherent, how can any sort of coherent interaction be conducted with the dead in the space of the poem? The 'box' that appears in the above extract is in one sense a form of security and preservation that recalls from Chapter 3 Anne Carson's enclosure of a body of textual matter and material relics in the solid outer structure of *Nox*. But in Young's poem, the 'notebooks' are 'locked' inside their housing, which is made of 'lead', a barrier that preserves a half-life while simultaneously putting it beyond reach and therefore resisting attempts at assimilation. As a self-reflexive 'investigator', Young delivers a note of caution to the

elegist who might hope to establish a coherent vision of the fragmented self as part of a pursuit of the other – 'you can only get so close to me'.

Conclusion

In *Elegy on Toy Piano*, the poet's apparent efforts to draw closer to a sense of mastery over the chaotic scene of death and destruction are undermined by a repeated fragmentation of the self. In Chapter 3, Anne Carson's admission that the photocopied material fragments of her brother's life are 'as close as we could get' to a recreated presence of the other, echoes the tone and content of Young's declaration that 'you can only get so close to me' (2005: 15). In arriving at a line that has the feeling of a blunt and irresolvable conclusion to an intense examination of the self, Young demonstrates that the disjunction between the elegist and the elegised other is founded as much on the unreachability of the self as it is on the overtakelessness of the dead.

When Young stages the destruction of the self in 'Halflives of Youngonium', his disrupted narrative is constituted by a fantastical unreality that parallels Daffy Duck's repeated annihilation. However, whereas Daffy continually reconstitutes his original form after having his features 'blasted to the back of his head' and 'bounced around', Young's alter ego Youngonium mutates into an alien form that is made up of recognisable self and unrecognisable other: 'Love me, love my lilac-valanced isoprene' (2005: 15). Peter Sloterdijk's suggestion, above, that 'passions and impulses' – and therefore, possibly, an obstructive self – will be ecstatically blasted away 'in the final burn-up' (1987: 127) acquires a more problematic truth in Young's imagined inferno. By means of Youngonium's half-life – a gaseous residue of a previously held notion of the self – the poet indicates that the self cannot be got round so easily; rather, its unavoidable and permanent presence in a form that registers its own absence makes the self as unreachable as the elegised other.

Given the physical and emotional devastation that the poet inflicts on Youngonium, Young might be described as one of the 'self-mutilators', whose 'last act of freedom is used to will what is terrifying' (Sloterdijk 1987: 127-28). But what Young discovers in the space of the elegy is perhaps more alarming: that the freedom to explore the nature of the self does not clear a space for a more coherent, comprehensible self – and in turn, a

more fathomable other – to emerge; rather, the self moves further beyond reach as the elegist's scrutiny of the self intensifies. In the title poem of *Elegy on Toy Piano*, Young observes the imminent death of 'the great poet' before arriving at his final stanza:

When something becomes ash,
there's nothing you can do to turn it back.
About this, even diamonds do not lie.

(2005: 85)

Young's reflective statement – at the end of a poem which appears to relate the demise of the self – resonates with a section of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 1888 poem, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', where after detailing the violence of elemental forces, Hopkins turns his mind to 'the Resurrection' and addresses his mortal self:

Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

(1986: 181)

In the final stanza of 'Elegy on Toy Piano', above, Young observes that the transformation of the corporeal body into ash is irreversible – the physical self becomes powdery residue, which is radically *other* but nevertheless constituted by fragments of the previous corporeal self. When Hopkins considers 'the Resurrection' – his observation of fading 'flesh' and 'mortal trash' recalls Emily Dickinson's poetic vision of transfiguration from 'flesh' to 'soul' (1970: 690) – he is also noting natural processes. The ash of the destroyed body – along with the fragments of 'potsherd, patch, matchwood' – travel downwards into the earth, before resolving into an 'immortal' form, the 'diamond', noted for its solidity and resistance to change. Hopkins's observation, 'I am all at once what Christ is, […] immortal diamond', suggests that the resurrection of the self is both physical and spiritual, a metaphorical and literal reincarnation as immortal diamond. Young's concluding stanza also notes the act of disinterment that is performed by the earth: diamonds are testament to the fact (that is, they 'do not lie') that ash does not 'turn […] back' into the body, but moves forward – or rather downwards – until it turns into an entirely new form, the diamond, which then returns towards the earth's surface

by means of volcanic disturbances. Young implies that the tangible diamond does not remain 'about' – that is, 'lie' in the vicinity of – the ash, but follows a reversal of the route taken by fragments of the self.

In this way, Young suggests the ash, as representation of the newly formed residue of the self, does not turn back from its path downwards into the earth's core – beyond the reach of the poet – and will not return as the solid, graspable entity that is Hopkins's diamond. Whereas Hopkins forges a reincarnated self through repetition of the first-person 'I' in 'I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, […] immortal diamond', Young separates ash and diamonds syntactically and spiritually. The blunt, end-stopped 'nothing you can do to turn it back' is reinforced by Young's concluding phrase, 'diamonds do not lie', indicating the *lie* that might promise a tangible restoration of the self in the poem. In Young's poem, 'something' is resurrected, but it is very much not a graspable incarnation of the self; rather, the diamond appears to represent the glittery illusion of such a promise that parallels the promised recapture of the dead in their plenitude.

Orpheus discovers through the act of turning his gaze back towards Eurydice that she cannot be *turned back* into a previously held notion of the other. In *Elegy on Toy Piano*, Young demonstrates that the elegy's response to death incorporates not only a reaching towards the other, but also a turning back towards the self that further problematises an encounter with the overtakelessness of the dead. In an untitled prose piece from *The Art of Recklessness*, Young observes that 'art that is at odds with itself, its own being, that contains seeds, signs, slashes of its own demise, embodies the conflicts of what it is to be alive' (2010: 52). Young's embodiment of his own being, and his subsequent demise in poetry that itself appears vulnerable to meltdown, is staged as an imagined crisis that places the self and the work under intense scrutiny. But what is at stake for a poet whose concerns for the singular body are placed in the context of an actual collective catastrophe? In the next chapter, I consider the ramifications of an encounter between the aesthetic artifice of the elegy and an outer reality that is constituted by an epidemic, and a community, that make their own demands for recognition.

Chapter 5

'Blooming in the Field of our Shatter': Exuberance and Epidemic in the Poetry of Mark Doty

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I examined the work of Dean Young as a site of rupture, where the poet's alter ego undergoes a process of disintegration and decomposition that suggests the overtakelessness of the dead is founded as much on the elegist's inability to connect with a coherent sense of the self as it is on the unreachability of the elegised other. The poet's apparent attempt to inhabit an 'edge-world' (Wilkinson 2007: 198), such that would allow him to incorporate facets of inner and outer reality, opens a debate about how the elegy might allow the free exchange and coexistence of subjective and objective material. In the context of Young's work, this poetic space is a territory that potentially enables him to explore the possibility of exerting more control over the scene of loss by juxtaposing brutal destruction with repeated playful reincarnation. But Young's amorphous edge-world displays its own vulnerability to the external reality that it attempts to regulate, and, when the poet observes that 'everything's flying apart' (2005: 23), both the self and the work appear vulnerable to the meltdown that Young inflicts on his alter ego.

Young fashions a poetic space in which he plays out imagined crises for the self and the other, where the cartoonish unreality of his depictions of violent death serve as a potent reminder of the scene of elegy as an unequal encounter between artifice and loss. The poet's complex and delicate negotiation with the condition of overtakelessness, which in one sense might be distilled into a recognition that the elegised other can only be approached through an aversion of the poetic gaze, is perhaps an experience that is felt especially keenly by the elegist grappling with the effects of personal loss. In Chapter 2, Mary Jo Bang's acute frustration resides not only in the continued absence of her son, but also in the incapacity of her poetry to retrieve him in his fullness. But what is at stake for an elegist who experiences the immediate effects of an actual catastrophe that incorporates private *and* public loss, a crisis in which the poet might perceive the demand that he should not turn away from either the individual or the wider

community of which the individual is a part? What pressures are placed on a body of work when it is required to respond to the impact of a deadly disease on the singular corporeal body as well as on the collective body of citizens that constitutes a crucial part of this particular poet's outer reality?

This chapter features the work of an elegist who, like Young, is concerned very much with the effects of material disintegration, but who is in the midst of a real, rather than a fictionalised mortal crisis. A significant proportion of Mark Doty's lyric poetry has emerged from direct and intimate experience of the AIDS epidemic – his partner Wally Roberts tested positive for HIV in 1989 and died five years later. Doty's poetry volumes *My Alexandria* and *Atlantis* (first published in America in 1993 and 1995 respectively)[1] are particularly marked by the personal and public impact of a disease that was first brought to the attention of the American population in 1981.[2] In an essay that examines poetry of grief, Doty makes reference to his own experience of the epidemic:

> In the early '80s my new partner, Wally, and I were aware of AIDS, whatever it was, on the edges of our Boston community, a lengthening shadow. Our friend Peter was the first person we knew to die of AIDS, in 1984, and then we were pitched into a crisis that continued until Wally's own death in 1994.
>
> (2006)[3]

For Doty, the 'lengthening shadow' of an approaching epidemic becomes a 'crisis' that from a primary personal perspective is constituted by the gradual disintegration and eventual death of his lover. Notions of the individual and the communal that reside in

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[1] In quotation, I refer to the UK paperback editions of *My Alexandria* (Jonathan Cape: 1995) and *Atlantis* (Cape: 1996). Prior to these two works, Doty's first volume of poetry *Turtle, Swan* (David R. Godine) was published in 1987. Other volumes include *Source* (Cape: 2002), *School of the Arts* (Cape: 2005), and *Theories and Apparitions* (Cape: 2008). His non-fiction includes two prose memoirs, *Heaven's Coast* (Harper Collins: 1996), which deals with his partner's death, and *Firebird* (Cape: 2000).

[2] On 3 July 1981, *The New York Times* published a story by Lawrence K. Altman headlined 'Rare Cancer Seen In 41 Homosexuals' about the sudden outbreak in New York and California of a fatal form of cancer called Kaposi's Sarcoma, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/03/us/rare-cancer-seen-in-41-homosexuals.html> [accessed 15 June 2014]. According to a timeline published on the aids.gov website, by the end of 1981 in America, 'there is a cumulative total of 270 reported cases of severe immune deficiency among gay men, and 121 of those individuals have died', but it was not until 24 September 1982 that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) first used the term AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). By the end of 1995, when Doty published *Atlantis* in America, '500,000 cases of AIDS have been reported in the U.S.', <http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/> [accessed 15 June 2014].

[3] Doty's essay, 'Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?', which was originally published on the Poetry Foundation website on 12 September 2006, takes as its starting point an examination of Wislawa Szymborska's poem 'Photograph from September 11th'.

Doty's initial separation of 'my new partner […] and I', followed by two instances of the collective 'we', point to a further dimension of the poet's own crisis – the potential conflict that might arise in his work between the personal loss of a lover and friends and the impact of an epidemic on the wider community. How does an elegist respond to an actual physical and social catastrophe that embraces elements of the private and the public, the individual and the communal?

In his essay on poetic grief, Doty remarks that one of the functions of elegy is '[t]o confirm […] that the rupture in the known world is pointed to, held up for attention, shared' (2006), indicating a tension between the personal 'rupture' and that which has implications for 'the known world', where individual deaths contribute to the 'shared' disintegration of a larger community. Doty's poetry occupies a position in both the genre of elegies and 'the genre of AIDS elegies', which, observes Melissa Zeiger, 'imports a communal politics and an overriding sense of *shared* catastrophe into the sphere of poetic production' (1997: 20). Zeiger adds that it is this communality, or 'common experience', that 'continues to define a poetic category' (1997: 21), and which carries for the elegist a potential freight of social responsibility that might surpass the confines of personal tragedy. Another dimension of Zeiger's 'catastrophe' arrives in the shape of societal repudiation that reveals the disintegration of a community goes beyond the site of the corporeal body. Jeffrey Weeks observed in 1985 that:

> AIDS […] is seen as the disease of the sexually excessive just as 'the homosexual' is seen as the social embodiment of a particular sexual constitution. The association of AIDS with homosexuality thus serves to critically undermine the basis of the gay identity. AIDS is the punishment for the forthright expression of certain sexual desires.
>
> (1985: 50)

There is a strong implication in Weeks's observation that 'forthright expression' is punished by the imposition of a justifiable silence – that is to say, the removal of a voice and an 'identity' from a body of people is followed by the permanent silence of death and disappearance. Societal repudiation of a community is based on the prejudice that resides in the conflation of homosexual/AIDS victim and the resulting exclusion that affords a political signification to otherness. In Chapter 1, Susan Howe responds to an ethical impulse in her encounter with the archived dead as she aims to preserve the otherness of the other by visualising silence and an unassimilable voice that is

fragmented and incoherent. Howe's interaction with otherness is confined to the textual spaces of the archive and her own word-collages, but Doty is confronted by immediate ethical concerns in an outer reality that he inhabits as a gay man during a time of epidemic and societal exclusion. Whereas Howe makes a point of fashioning spaces of silence in her work, Doty may experience his outer reality as a pressing social responsibility to counter the silencing of a community with work that is marked by its own distinctive poetic expression. Does Doty's syntactically complex, metaphor-laden lyric poetry perform a restoration of voice and identity to a community that is made other by a heteronormative society in which – as noted in the Introduction to this thesis – the prevailing social norms already dictate that 'death is a scandal to be avoided or denied and grief an embarrassment to be deplored or derided' (Gilbert 2007: 411)?

It can be argued that heteronormative society's application of a further layer of otherness to both the individual and collective elegised other represents a social and political dimension of overtakelessness for the elegist, as the homosexual AIDS victim is made an illegitimate subject for mourning. As a consequence, the AIDS elegist's expression of grief is also delegitimised, and the act of poetic mourning acquires political signification beyond the space of the poem. Gail Holst-Warhaft remarks that '[t]he grief of the AIDS survivors is tainted by public indifference, by the absence of a united response to death' (2000: 139), indicating that the elegist might perceive the requirement to formulate a response not only to the unfathomable absence of the other, but also the wider absence of communal concern for the dead.

Discussing literary treatment of the AIDS epidemic in America, Timothy F. Murphy observes that '[t]estimony for the dead is not driven by a desire to overcome death, but to prevent it from eroding the meaningfulness of life' (1993: 316). It is here, perhaps, that Doty stands apart from the other elegists covered in this thesis, since in the context of the AIDS epidemic, 'the meaningfulness of life', as Murphy puts it, can be eroded not only by death but also by the cause of death – and the wider societal response to the perceived implications of this cause. As Weeks notes above, AIDS – and therefore the death that is an almost inevitable consequence of the disease (at least at the time of Weeks's observations in 1985) – can be regarded as 'the punishment' for a particular

type of behaviour.[4] It is likely then that AIDS, with its attendant fears of contagion, will remove the subsequent focus away from an individual's life and onto the precise cause of death that inspires the original prejudice.

Later in this chapter, I will examine Doty's encounter with a particular strand of overtakelessness that describes the loss of the individual not merely to the unassimilable void of death, but also to a void of public concern – the 'indifference' that Holst-Warhaft notes, above – that mutates into outright repudiation of the dying and the dead. Furthermore, the poetic presence of the individual is threatened by the wider community's demand for recognition, so that the meaningfulness of individual loss may be sacrificed to some extent in the interest of a more concentrated poetic gaze on the communal. Doty admits that '[d]eath is, simply, not to be understood' and goes on to observe that the poetic project of 'articulating meaning' might be best pursued '[t]hrough negotiation with the fact of mortality' (2006), rather than either submitting to its reality, or as Murphy remarks above, being 'driven by a desire to overcome death'.

I will show in this chapter that Doty's 'negotiation' with death and overtakelessness is constituted by a delicate encounter with the competing claims of the individual and the community for poetic presence in the face of a marked absence of legitimacy for private or public mourning. Doty suggests that an encounter with overtakelessness, figured through material disintegration and the mutual destruction indicated in the transgressive pleasure of sexual exuberance, should be placed in the context of an understanding – problematic in itself to assimilate – that it is precisely decay and incipient death that afford aesthetic brilliance. How does the heavily aestheticised body of Doty's poetry encounter such brilliance, and in what ways does the poet's consideration of the richness and complexity that emerge in the process of disintegration contribute to an understanding of the dimensions of overtakelessness?

[4] In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst notes that '[i]n the West, AIDS was identified principally with gay men and until 1996, when combination drug treatments could stabilize the health of those with HIV, the syndrome inexorably tended towards rapid multiple systems failure and death' (2008: 125).

'Edge of Immensity': The Intricacy of Decay

When Doty remarks above, that a function of elegy is to indicate 'the rupture in the known world', he refers to the emotional disturbance that results from death and disappearance, as well as the subsequent irremediable separation of self and other that defines in one sense the elegist's encounter with overtakelessness. An initial instinct of the poet might be to heal the rupture, to effect a textual bridging of the divide that separates the elegist and the elegised so that the dead may be reached and pulled back in their plenitude. But Doty's subsequent remark that this rupture should be 'pointed to' rather than concealed, and that it should be 'shared' rather than privately scrutinised, indicates that this is a poet for whom a more tangible *material* fracture has an aesthetic value that warrants explicit display – that it should be 'held up for attention' and admired.

In Chapter 4, I examined the ways in which Dean Young's contemplation of rupture tends to turn inwards as part of a process of mutilation, but Doty's gaze at disintegration appears to facilitate a move more towards appreciation than bathetic self-implication. In an interview, Doty remarks that 'because the world has death in it, […] all perfections are limited', and for this reason 'the only real beauty is broken beauty, fallen from the ideal' (Bolick 1999). In 'Two Ruined Boats', Doty explores the aesthetic richness that is inherent in material decay:

Here, at the edge of immensity,
they seem the axis of the harbour,
my twin derelicts, destinations
of every morning's walk, centre

of a composition made vaster
by the startling appearance of sun,
[…]
Look

at the sheer intricacy of wreck,
sombre, self-shadowing; how many colours
rust is, all vaguely luminous,
like fifty shades of eyeshadow.

This drenched failure suggests
a whole aesthetic of ruin: salt patinas,
flecked and scoured exactitudes,

a history of colour: Venetian reds,

brazilwood, cochineal. Here, *morello*,
the colour of ripe Italian blackberries,
here the *berrettino* of raw silk.

(1996: 81)

What does it mean for Doty's poem to open 'at the edge of immensity'? The speaker identifies the natural physical threshold that situates the boats – they are in 'the harbour', and therefore at the frontier between land and the expanse of ocean. To be at the edge of immensity implies also that the 'twin derelicts' are poised on the verge of the unknown, a final journey into disintegration and absence. From a more personal poetic perspective, there is in Doty's recognition of the vastness of the landscape, together with 'the startling appearance of sun', a suggestion of the awe and incomprehension associated with an experience of the sublime. In the context of the experience related in Doty's poem, there is an implication that the speaker as poet is undergoing a Kantian experience, as described in 'Analytic of the Sublime', wherein sublime objects, such as are represented by the immensity of sea, land and sky, 'raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height', which subsequently 'elevates the imagination' (Kant 1951: 100-01). In terms of Doty's allegory of incipient death in 'Two Ruined Boats', it is possible that Doty's encounter with the immensity of imminent absence might spiritually and artistically raise the poet to heights of emotional intensity sufficient to encompass what lies before him.

However, there is a rupture that prevents the potential connection between this textual encompassment and the capacity of the poet to fully assimilate and express the aesthetic splendour of the scene that he contemplates. Specifically, Kant remarks on 'the immensity of nature and […] the insufficiency of our faculties to take in a standard proportionate to the aesthetical magnitude of its realm' (1951: 101). From this theory of the sublime, it is possible to construe that Doty's 'composition made vaster' shows that the *task of* the poetic composition is made infinitely more complex by the very 'magnitude' of what he faces. In other words, to be at the edge of incomparable vastness – that is, to approach and contemplate the unfathomable territory of absence – incorporates a recognition on the elegist's part that he will inevitably remain on the *periphery* of that from which he has been separated.

In his essay on the sublime, William Wordsworth writes: 'Power awakens the sublime […] when it rouses us to a sympathetic energy & calls upon the mind to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining' (1974: II 354).[5] There is a reminder here of my discussion in Chapter 4 of Dean Young's 'grasping | at something you can't see' (2005: 54), situating the elegist on the edge of an impenetrable blankness that entices a poetic approach precisely because of its resistance to encompassment. However, in the above extract from 'Two Ruined Boats', the apparent blankness of immensity is made still larger 'by the startling appearance of sun'. In one respect, the light that floods Doty's scene might afford the mind greater capacity to attain an understanding and an expression of what it encounters. But the astonishment that resides in an observation of the 'startling' nature of the effulgence also incorporates the recognition that this is an appearance that defeats poetic expression.

In his discussion of Wordsworth's exploration of the sublime, Matthew Brennan notes that in works such as Wordsworth's 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', 'the perceiving mind overflows with an overwhelming plentitude and tries to grasp something it dimly sees in the deluge of radiant light' (1987: 55). The apparent paradox of seeing 'dimly' in a 'deluge of radiant light', which in 'Tintern Abbey' is figured by Wordsworth through 'the light of setting suns' (1984: 134), suggests that the radiance of sunlight illuminates exactly what cannot be captured by the poet; the brilliance of the natural world might be approached, but ultimately defeats linguistic figuration and comprehension. In 'Two Ruined Boats', it appears that Doty must confront the realisation that his figurative representations will remain on the fringes of enormity; that is, his poetry will make approaches towards its subject without encompassing the vividness of what the work approaches, precisely because the subject's integral luminosity places it beyond the poet's reach.

The aesthetic splendour of Doty's boats – and the significance to the poet of this unassimilable brilliance – is indicated by their positioning at the 'centre || of a composition', an elegy that takes as its primary focus their material *de*composition. Does Doty suggest that the decaying objects – metaphorical representatives of the dying – are

[5] In Volume II of *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful' appears as 'Appendix III' in the section 'A Guide Through the District of the Lakes'. In their Introduction to this section, Owen and Smyser refer to 'MSS. Prose 28, which the Wordsworth Library has entitled "The Sublime and the Beautiful", a title we preserve' (1974: 131).

elevated and made vaster by being at the edge of immensity? That is to say, does that which is on the verge of dissolution acquire intensity by the very fact of its close proximity to death and evanescence? In his exploration of the significance of space, Gaston Bachelard proposes a point of connection between the internal processes of the individual and the enormity of the outside world when he observes that 'immensity in the intimate domain is intensity, an intensity of being, the intensity of a being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate immensity' (1994: 193). Bachelard adds that '[t]he two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other […] in their growth' (1994: 201), so that the aesthetic composition of the boats in Doty's poem is potentially made more intense by their exposure to the exterior space that represents incipient decomposition.

Doty's observation of the shattered boats serves as a reminder from Chapter 4 of Dean Young's self imagined as exhausted machinery, disintegrating into separate fragments. But a process that seems irredeemable for Young appears to have a more redemptive quality for Doty. Doty's invitation to 'look || at the sheer intricacy of wreck' invites comparisons with Susan Howe's delicate negotiations with the complexities of the archive, discussed in Chapter 1, where her work suggests that a physical care of intricately assembled documents must be exercised in tandem with an ethical concern. Doty's description of the wreck in 'the harbour' as 'sombre, self-shadowing' recalls Howe's poetic *harbouring* of recovered fragments of the other in her textual collages, such that the other, as constituted by material retrieved from the archive, may be said to shadow the self – that is, Howe's poetic body.

For Doty, too, an idea of self-shadowing incorporates a protection of the integral otherness of the other, its unique identity; there is in Doty's wreck an idea of the guarding of the multilayered nature of the boats' composition, even as the same objects are on the brink of dissolution. The processes of decay add intricacy to the ruined boats so that the aesthetic value of their appearance is enhanced and sheltered – that is, *shadowed* – by the edge-world that they inhabit. Doty holds up for attention the complexity and beauty that are brought to the surface of objects when they are shadowed by decay; moreover, it is an invitation to consider the fact that such intensity only becomes truly visible when such objects are on the point of crossing the threshold of immensity. Doty's notion of shadowing is then picked up in the 'colours' of 'rust' and

the 'fifty shades of eyeshadow', adding to the impression that the aesthetic detail of the boats' appearance is crafted by the same processes that are bringing the boats to their natural end.

Doty's perception of decomposition appears to intersect with that explored in Dean Young's work when Doty admits the 'drenched failure' of his disintegrating boats, but from this Doty proposes 'a whole aesthetic of ruin'. Whereas Young's mutating body is a messy mélange of gases and liquids, Doty's decaying boats are effectively transformed into artistic creations by 'salt patinas, | flecked and scoured exactitudes'. Doty is keen to demonstrate that the shadow of decay is an aesthetic pleasure in its own right: the shades of rust encompass variety ('how many colours') and a measure of brilliance ('all vaguely luminous'), and he implies that it is death – perhaps more so than life – that brings an individual 'history' into visible existence. For instance, the timber of the 'brazilwood' tree is culled in order to produce a red dye, and the scarlet colour of 'cochineal' is made from the dried and crushed bodies of a female scale insect. Thus, the 'history of colour' indicates Doty's observation that each shade of red in his poem owes its aesthetic appeal to a life – and a death – that has gone before. The visual splendour of the brazilwood and cochineal is complemented by the taste of 'ripe Italian blackberries' and the touch of 'raw silk' in what become rich strata of hues and texture.

In his consideration of Doty's work, Tim Dean remarks that 'Doty seems to appreciate both […] the beautiful *and* the dilapidated – or, more precisely, his poetic sensibility refuses to draw a hard-and-fast line between these conventionally polar categories' (2000). That is, Doty's aesthetic of ruin aims to conjoin the intimacy of his objects' beautiful intricacy with the immensity of dilapidation, so that the dilapidated *becomes* beautiful when envisaged in Doty's painterly poetry; the many shades of decay fashioned by rust and salt effectively transform the ruined boats into a textual still life. In his prose work *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, Doty engages in a detailed discussion of Jan Davidsz. de Heem's painting *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, and in a passage of particular interest and relevance to 'Two Ruined Boats' Doty widens his gaze from the intimate to the immense:

> Everything in the field of our vision is passing. And some of these things will be here just the briefest while; these opened oysters, this already spotted quince are

> right at the edge of corruption even as we catch sight of them. […] Everything floats on this brink, suspended above the long tunnel of disappearance.
>
> (2001: 21)[6]

Doty's examination of the significance of de Heem's painted objects, the 'opened oysters' and the 'already spotted quince', creates a parallel with the ruined boats, their 'flecked and scoured exactitudes'. Where Doty's boats stand 'at the edge of immensity', de Heem's oysters and quince, 'suspended' in time, 'are right at the edge of corruption', caught in the moment before decay and disintegration. The fact that 'everything *floats* on this brink' (my emphasis) serves as a reminder of the ruined boats in the harbour, and gives the decaying objects an ethereal quality, an aesthetic lightness and delicacy that resonates with otherworldliness. The word 'floats' implies that imminent ruin adds an extra flourish to the 'already spotted quince', just as Doty's ruined boats acquire intricacy as they stand on the verge of disappearance.

Doty remarks that still life, with its underdrift of death as the still*ed* life, and its resonance of a life frozen in time, is 'an art that points to […] timelessness through things permanently caught in time. That points to immensity through intimacy' (2001: 66). Doty's intention in 'Two Ruined Boats' appears to be to point his decaying objects – and the reader – towards the immensity of death by means of his observations of the intimate details of decay:

And though it all seems to be

approaching dissolution, all going blank
as the dank interior glimpsed
(chinablack, like antique ink)
through the shattered hatch,

how various and complicated
these frettings are *en route*
to nothing.

(1996: 81-82)

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[6] Doty refers to Jan Davidsz. de Heem's oil painting as '*Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*' (2001: 5), although on the website of The Metropolitan Museum of Art it is named *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*. The work was painted by de Heem in Antwerp, *c.* 1640, and was purchased by the MMA in 1871, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/436636?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=*&who=Jan+Davidsz+de+Heem&pos=1> [accessed 12 June 2013].

It is worth noting the way Doty indicates the relentless onward movement of the static boat towards the enormity of oblivion: it is '*approaching* dissolution', and '*going* blank'; the 'dank interior' of the boat is 'glimpsed […] *through* the shattered hatch (my emphases); and the 'frettings are *en route* | to nothing'. It is implied that the intimate details of the boat are initiating a form of agency that is propelling the shattered object towards its demise; further, that the rich history of the boats – with a glimpse of exotic journeys inhabiting the word 'chinablack' – has been painted by the decay that has brought it to the point of dissolution. Doty's comparison of the colour of the 'interior' of the boat to 'antique ink' – as if the wooden structure is suffused with ancient inscriptions – indicates that the processes of ageing and weathering have achieved an aesthetic depth and permanence that cannot be encompassed.

In a poetic move that recalls Mary Jo Bang's encounter with an other who eludes the grasp of language, discussed in Chapter 2, Doty demonstrates that to give an impression of the frettings on the boat using textual marks pales in comparison to the intimacy and exuberance of what the speaker observes in the actual physical marks on the boat – the object in its plenitude. There is an implied contrast between the 'nothing' that the frettings are '*en route* to', and the 'nothing' in the speaker's subsequent admission in 'Two Ruined Boats' that 'I've nowhere else to go, nothing else | to make' (1996: 83). But whereas Bang tries to recreate a version of her son that is untouched by 'addiction catastrophe' (2007: 78) and decay, Doty advances the idea that the aesthetic delight of the boat owes its infinite variety precisely to the imminent and pressing destination of 'nothing' – that is, disintegration and absence. Without an immediate destination – 'I've nowhere else to go' – then the same level of intricacy cannot be achieved by the poet, because 'I've […] nothing else to make'. The aesthetic detail of the pattern of abrasions on the woodwork of the boat, Doty demonstrates, stands in contrast to his own written account of these frettings, since 'all I can do', he admits, is 'describe' (1996: 83).

Bachelard remarks that when one encounters the 'limitless world' that is 'immensity', then 'the functions of description […] are ineffective. One feels that there is *something else* to be expressed' (1994: 185-86). Bachelard's notion of an ungraspable '*something else*' that eludes description is very much suggestive of the tension that sits at the heart of elegy – between the impulse to achieve a proximity to the dead and the ultimate dissatisfaction that results from a recognition of what is missed by the poem. However, Doty's anxiety

appears to reside in the incapacity of his poetry to encompass the plenitude of the exact marks of decay and disintegration that will *bring about* the death of his objects in 'Two Ruined Boats'. The precise nature of the ageing and decomposition that is displayed by Doty's boats can only be achieved by the actions of those particular agents – the salt and the rust – on the material body. The poet might be able to achieve *an* exactitude – what Doty calls in his examination of the art of description 'the satisfaction of matching words to the world' (2010: 9) – but not *the* exactitude that is demonstrated by the disintegrating object itself at that specific time and in that specific place:

this decline's
too steep to fix, and my art
could only articulate the sheen,
or chronicle the fashion in which

the world gains lustre as it falls apart.

(1996: 82)

There is an implied contrast between the 'steep decline' – which as well as pointing to the degree of decay, also has an undertow of the depth of expression afforded by the marks of disintegration – and the more impressionistic quality of Doty's 'art', which by the poet's own admission 'could only articulate' aspects of the object's glittering surface. The words 'sheen' and 'lustre' speak of an aesthetic gloss that is immediately available to the eye; similarly, beyond its most obvious definition in this context, the word 'fashion' carries the freight of an outer layer, something ephemeral that is presented externally to attract attention. The boat is too advanced in its state of decay to 'fix' from a structural perspective but, more significantly, the intimacy of the boat's interiority – Bachelard's '*something else*' – is too deeply implanted simply to fix in Doty's poetic vision. The poet can offer only a subjective textual impression of the object's intimate and ungraspable expression 'as it falls apart'.

The poet's ways of seeing the ruined boats have an exactitude all of their own, which is in turn coloured by the observer's own unique experience of the world. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, the elegist's depiction of the dead will be at least in part a subjective account, voiced on behalf of those who are absent. But what constitutes Doty's particular subjectivity given the poet's specific rupture in his own intimate world? In *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, Doty describes returning to the Metropolitan Museum

of Art in New York to take another look at de Heem's still life only to discover that, in the time since he last saw the work, he 'had been reimagining' the painting (2001: 63), so that what results is a 'reinvention'; what he has done in the intervening period is 'recast this image of the world in the light of my own affections' (2001: 65). To translate this internal process to Doty's handling of decaying objects, the immensity of incipient death acquires a deep intimacy through the lens of his own particular 'affections'. For Doty, whose partner Wally died a year before the publication of *Atlantis*, the word 'affections' acquires an extra emotional resonance that crystallises in the poet's observation towards the end of 'Two Ruined Boats':

> Who'd have thought
> those grand lexicons of colour would be
>
> hammered by the backhoe to wrack and powder?
> Fallen down, broken apart, carried away:
> things are lovely, late, in the last hour
> we'll see them. This year? Next month?
>
> I watch him failing and there's nothing to do
> but describe – a mode of travel,
> but not a means of repair.
>
> (1996: 83-84)

The classification of colour as 'grand lexicons' fashions an intersection between Doty's verbal art and the painter's visual art, but it is in Doty's use of the pronoun 'him' in line 7 of the above extract that the poet juxtaposes ideas of the immensity of the boats' disintegration with the intimate and personal anxiety that is attached to a dying lover. The word 'late' embraces both the final moments of a life that is 'failing' – thus suspending Wally in time in the manner of the objects in de Heem's still life – and the new classification of the poet's partner after his death. But Doty also points to an idea of his own lateness at the scene of disintegration – the separation of his words from the intimacy of wreck and the loveliness of 'the last hour'. Doty indicates that imminent death brings previously unseen powers of expression to the decaying object, but also that death in itself possesses the depth of expression that is denied to the elegist – the living, distanced observer. As a lover, Doty is forced to watch as his failing partner is 'hammered […] to wrack and powder', and later, after the event, all he can do as an elegist is describe the process of such a disintegration.

Doty's depiction of the previously observed individual shadings of rust and salt – the unique marks of each disintegrating boat – being absorbed into a powder of unspecified colour foregrounds in its most immediate sense the mutation of the corporeal body into ash following death. But the tension between 'them' and 'him' in the above extract indicates also an idea of the loss of the individual to the communal – during a time of epidemic in particular, Doty's partner is one among many to be 'broken apart' and 'carried away', as the poet describes. The poet's image of watching his lover 'failing' travels beyond a notion of the ebbing body and locates the potential failure of singularity to display its own discrete markings in the face of the demands of a wider community for recognition and signification. In what ways does Doty attempt to accommodate notions of both the individual and the communal in his work, given the potentially conflicting demands of private and public loss?

Individuality and Communality

The reality of death during a time of epidemic – a particular characteristic of which Doty hints at, above, in his implied anxiety about the imminent death of his lover and the future deaths of others, '[t]his year? Next month?' – is instrumental in highlighting the tension that divides the personal and poetic impulses of this particular elegist. Doty is intent on foregrounding the intimacy of personal tragedy, but he is simultaneously aware that each singular victim is part of a larger experience of loss. In this context, the overtakelessness that encloses the elegised other is potentially problematised still further by the absorption of the individual into a wider concern for the communal, so that personal loss is itself lost from view. In 'Becoming a Meadow', the nature of the elegist's dilemma emerges in a private reflection as the speaker browses in a bookshop:

Yesterday morning we walked a beach where the tide
    angled

and broke in beautiful loops, the waves'
endless rows of bold cursive
one atop the other, scrawling an exercise page

of *O*s in a copybook the world's never tired of.
A place called Head of the Meadow.
I don't know how to say how perfect it was,

though it was only a short walk; the morning was cold,

we hadn't brought enough to wear.
For weeks I've been turning over and over

one barely articulated question; here,
among the cultivated disorder of the book-rows,
the words present themselves as a sort of answer:

a meadow accepts itself as various, allows
some parts of itself to always be going away,
because whatever happens in that blown,

ragged field of grass and sway
is the meadow, and threading the frost
of its unlikely brilliance yesterday

we also were the meadow.

(1995: 63-64)[7]

The idea of inexpressible beauty resides in the crashing and dissolving waves, which are rupturing; but in the process of breaking, they are fashioning 'beautiful loops' that are aesthetically pleasing while also depicting the creation of organically generated writing – a 'bold cursive' – that echoes the 'history of colour' inscribed by the rust on Doty's ruined boats. However, the continuous 'turning over and over', like the action of the waves, of 'one barely articulated question' in the speaker's mind communicates an anxiety that travels beyond the poet's observation of textual inefficacy in the face of natural phenomena. For a meadow to 'accept[s] itself as various' represents the recognition that it is made up of a number of different constitutive parts; further, it is an implied acceptance of the fact that within a living community, such as is represented by the meadow in Doty's poem, death will remain constant – that is, 'some parts of itself' will 'always be going away'.

The image of the meadow as a communal space that admits intimate individuality as part of its overall identity serves as a metaphor for the AIDS elegist's dilemma in trying

[7] Cf. Robert Duncan, 'Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow': 'It is only a dream of the grass blowing | east against the source of the sun' (1969: 7). Duncan's lines, in a poem that considers the power of the imagination, resonate with Doty's imagery in 'Becoming a Meadow': 'The titles of the books, | the letters of the writers' names blow || like grasses' (1995: 64). In an undated online essay, Peter O'Leary remarks that '[t]he dream Duncan commemorates in this poem is real, reflecting his own initiation into poetry', adding that when Duncan wrote it 'in 1956, he was 37 years old and on the threshold of what he would come to refer to as his major work, namely the poems comprising his great trilogy of the 1960s, *The Opening of the Field* (1960), *Roots and Branches* (1964) and *Bending the Bow* (1968)', <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/180438> [accessed 16 August 2014].

to observe both private and public loss within the space of the poem; an understanding that the individual is also part of the communal. Doty juxtaposes the singularity of 'some parts […] always […] going away' with the notion that individual loss is happening within the context of the whole, the 'blown, || ragged field of grass and sway'. Doty's choice of the word 'sway' picks up associations of loss from his earlier phrase 'always be going away', but accommodates also a notion of return in its movement. There is instability in 'sway', but there is also an undercurrent of *holding sway*, gaining power by means of togetherness. Doty makes the point that just as the life of its constitutive parts is an essential aspect of the identity of the meadow, so death – the going away of those parts – is also a crucial component of its natural machinery; in the words of the poem, 'whatever happens […] *is* the meadow'. Doty later imagines the whole bookstore being inundated with water:

And then the whole place, the narrow aisles and stacks,
is one undulant, salt-swollen meadow of water,
one filling and emptying wave, spilling and pulling back,

and everything waves are: dissolving, faster,
only to swell again,
[…]
And if one wave breaking says
You're dying, then the rhythm and shift of the whole
says nothing about endings, and half the shawling head

of each wave's spume pours into the trough
of the one before,
and half blows away in spray, backward, toward the open
sea.

(1995: 64-65)

Doty continues to observe the tension between ideas of the individual – the 'narrow aisles and stacks' – and the communal when he observes that 'the whole place […] is one undulant, salt-swollen meadow of water'; all the individual components become 'one', a 'filling and emptying wave', which incorporates the acceptance of new individuals into its 'meadow', just as others are being taken away in a constant cycle of death and renewal. But the undulance, the filling and emptying, the 'spilling and pulling back', and the 'dissolving' and 'swell' are completed as one entity, the whole body of water. The phrase 'says nothing about endings' indicates an anxiety on the elegist's part that the mourning of an individual may be lost in a community that is witnessing

multiple deaths – the sound of an individual wave breaking is inevitably transmuted into and absorbed by 'the rhythm and shift of the whole'.

In the final stanza of 'Becoming a Meadow', above, Doty's heavily aestheticised image of death and renewal – figured through the associations of the word 'trough' with the grave, and the recycling of each wave as it is blown 'toward the open sea' – suggests that the poet inundates the reader with aesthetic detail in order to convey his own personal engulfment. In one sense, Doty indicates the overwhelming natural force of what he witnesses, but there is also an implied understanding that the community as a whole will survive, despite the uncomfortable reality that particular individual constitutive parts will expire and dissolve. Tim Dean observes of Doty's work that his 'poetic self finds aesthetic pleasure in abundance' (2000), and in this instance it appears that the profusion of the ocean acts as a trope for the restorative quantitative power of communality over individuality.

Doty's apparent emotional investment in communality may attest to his earlier observation of the meadow's 'unlikely brilliance' – a phrase that echoes in his poem 'A Display of Mackerel' where 'parallel rows' of dead fish, laid 'on ice' in a Massachusetts grocery store, are noted for their 'luminosity':

Splendour, and splendour,
and not a one in any way

distinguished from the other
– nothing about them
of individuality.

(1996: 12)

The repeated word 'splendour' affords the idea of brilliance through duplication, and, by means of the poem's observation that such splendour derives from the fact that 'not a one in any way' can be 'distinguished from the other', Doty proposes that a certain luminosity is garnered by the communal, rather than by the individual. In his own reflections on the aims of 'A Display of Mackerel', Doty considers his central idea to be that 'our glory is not our individuality […] but our commonness' – a difficult concept to accommodate, as he admits:

> I do not like this idea. I would rather be one fish, sparkling in my own pond, but

> experience does not bear this out. And so I have tried to convince myself, here, that beauty lies in the whole and that therefore death, the loss of the part, is not so bad – is, in fact, almost nothing.
>
> (1997: 73)[8]

Considering Doty's deployment of 'nothing' – first in the context of 'individuality' in the above extract from 'A Display of Mackerel', and then in the context of 'loss' in his analysis of his own thought processes behind the poem – it is worth noting the different layers of meaning invested in the word. First, the phrase 'nothing about them | of individuality' shows that in death the mackerel have lost all notion of singularity – there is nothing about them that would indicate to the speaker that they are anything but communal, or as Doty writes later in 'A Display of Mackerel', 'they're *all* exact expressions | of the one soul' (1996: 12). Further, the observation that the mackerel have 'nothing about them' advances the notion that the fish are surrounded by an aura of nothingness – that is, the profound absence of death – denoted at least in part by the physical reality that they are fixed 'in parallel rows, | on ice' (1996: 12). Doty's observation in his essay on the poem that 'death […] is, in fact, almost nothing' creates a correspondence between death and individuality in the poem's phrase 'nothing about them | of individuality' – that what death might bring, in fact, is the welcome demise of individuality. The 'nothing' that is 'about them' is made up 'of individuality', and their 'commonness' in death is perhaps the source of their 'glory' and 'beauty' in Doty's words. There is, continues Doty in 'A Display of Mackerel', a human comparison to be drawn with the appearance and eventual fate of the fish:

Suppose we could iridesce,

like these, and lose ourselves
entirely in the universe
of shimmer – would you want

to be yourself only,
unduplicatable, doomed
to be lost? They'd prefer,

plainly, to be flashing participants,
multitudinous.

(1996: 13)

[8] Doty's essay, 'Souls on Ice', also appears on the Academy of American Poets website, <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/souls-ice> [accessed 19 June 2014].

It is useful to compare the freight carried by 'lose' in line 2 of the above extract with that carried by 'lost' in line 7. To 'lose ourselves | entirely in the universe | of shimmer' indicates the idea of a welcome engulfment by the aesthetic exterior of an object, recalling Doty's engrossment by the 'sheen' and 'lustre' of the ruined boats. Further, the juxtaposition of the ideas of losing ourselves and 'shimmer' foregrounds the intensity that is radiated by the dead mackerel. Although the fish are stilled like Doty's ruined boats and the objects in de Heem's painting, discussed earlier, they are afforded captivating iridescence – the 'flashing' implies also that the fish are still in rapid motion – by their multitudinousness; the mackerel, like the boats, bring a whole aesthetic of ruin. To throw off the shackles of the singular self, and become 'participants' in a vibrant community of fellow citizens, contrasts sharply with the idea of being 'lost' – that is, 'doomed' to be constrained by the boundaries and limits of the self when there is a whole other 'universe' that beckons. Doty develops this idea in a later poem, 'In their Flight', when he writes of 'the dead' that 'they've been singular long enough' and adds:

We can't let ourselves see what
enormous work it is
to be one of something, to exert
the will to sustain those boundaries.
The dead, rimless,

loosed from particularity,
move out toward the edge of the city,
someplace the flock can unknot itself
freely, where they can feast in the fields
oblivious to the column of smoke roiling behind them.

(2005: 35)

In his exploration of the relationship between death and eroticism, Georges Bataille goes some way to illuminating the concept of the 'boundaries' of singularity when he notes the essential separateness of human beings, which resists all attempts at erasure: '[B]etween one being and another, there is […] a discontinuity. […] If you die, it is not my death. You and I are *discontinuous* beings' (1987: 12). Where Doty notes the restrictive boundaries of 'particularity' in 'In their Flight', Bataille remarks that the state of discontinuity 'is a deep gulf'. But the action of being 'loosed', as Doty puts it, into Bataille's conception of 'continuity' – where the restrictive parameters of singularity are removed – can be achieved through death: 'This gulf is death in one sense […]. It is my

intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being' (Bataille 1987: 12-13).

In these circumstances, to allow 'ourselves' – that is, the mourner or the elegist – see the huge effort required 'to sustain' the boundaries of individual existence, as Doty puts it, is to accentuate the tension at the heart of poetic mourning. That is to say, the effects of individual disappearance – and the perception of overtakelessness that accompanies loss – might actually be offset by an understanding of what Doty describes as the sense of liberation that the dead enjoy in escaping those boundaries and being freed 'from particularity'. The elegist might pause to consider how to bring meaningfulness to personal loss, when, in the above passage from 'In their Flight', the dead appear to be immersed in the idea of being 'rimless', free from the boundaries of a life marked by Bataille's 'discontinuity', and loosed into a world where a newly found condition of continuity can be enjoyed. Bataille adds:

> We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.
>
> (1987: 15)

Bataille's observation of what is 'hard to bear' appears to resonate with Doty's admission above, that what he finds unpalatable – although at the same time hard to resist – is the idea that 'commonness' should have more lustre than individuality. The condition of 'primal continuity', as Bataille puts it, that might be achieved through death allows what Doty describes as 'the flock' to 'unknot itself | freely' and to 'feast in the fields'. According to Bataille, there is a profound tension between the desire for life and individuality and the impulse to escape discontinuity through dissolution. Doty implies in the final line of the above extract from 'In their Flight' that non-existence might have a paradoxical allure for those who enter its territory, 'oblivious' to what they are leaving behind. However, as I will show in the next section, during the AIDS epidemic in particular any notion of a liberation of the body by means of death is subject to the severe and punitive restrictions of the society of which that body is a part.

'Body Atop Body': Repudiation of the Other

In the extract from 'In their Flight', above, Doty explores the tension between the restrictive parameters of singularity and the 'rimless' freedom of continuity in such a way as to suggest that the loss of individual loss – its potential diminishment in the face of a communal demand for signification – might be reluctantly accommodated by the poetic mourner. There may be scope for recognition on the elegist's part that although individual erasure is devastating in terms of the immediate effects of loss – and the subsequent unreachability of the elegised other – the absorption of the individual into the vigorous processes of a constantly regenerating communality might bring about the rechanneling of singularity into a robust and enduring collective identity.

In 'In their Flight', Doty's location of the dead in 'the city' observes the tension between issues of individual and collective identity as they are played out every day in hugely populated urban spaces. But Doty also notes the positioning of the American city as a primary focus for concern about the origins and development of the AIDS epidemic. In his 1986 account of the impact of the disease, Dennis Altman writes:

> [W]hile AIDS seemed at first to be a disease primarily confined to male homosexuals, so, too, it seemed largely an American disease, and even the increasing likelihood that its origins lay in central Africa did little to shake this image of it as somehow linked to modern America. In its first several years it seemed largely confined to large American cities with particularly prominent gay populations – New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles.
>
> (1986: 14-15)

In 'In their Flight', when Doty describes the movement of the dead 'out toward *the edge* of the city' (my emphasis), he points to a potential conflict between an idea of the city as an arena of shared identity and inclusion and that same city's capacity for restriction and exclusion. Altman adds that '[t]he perception of AIDS as a gay American disease easily feeds into a particular moralistic view that depicts AIDS as a disease of modern decadence, for which both homosexuality and America itself can stand as convenient symbols' (1986: 175). Altman observes that an external repudiation of America's internal 'decadence' might contribute to a perception outside the country's borders that America's gay population should be deprived of the right to mourn and be mourned by an international community. But Doty's conception of an edge-world *within* America

proposes the notion that his country's cities operate their own machinery of exclusion. Does Doty encounter a social and political dimension of overtakelessness that threatens to delegitimise, and place beyond reach, the dead and the dying on the grounds of their sexual orientation – and the conflation of this sexuality with deadly disease? In the following passage from 'Mercy on Broadway', Doty appears to depict the city as a space of unlimited pleasure:

What do you want right now?

What can't the city teach you
to want? It's body atop body here,

lovely and fragile armour dressed up
as tough, it's so many beats there's

something you can dance to, plan on it,
flash and hustle all up and down

this avenue. Don't let it fool you,
grief's going down all over

these blocks, invisible only
because indifferent and ravenous

Broadway swallows it all,
a blowsy appetite just as eager

to eat you as to let you go[.]

(1998: 94)

Doty's phrase 'body atop body' embraces ideas of togetherness – body protecting body, like the protective 'loops' of Doty's waves, 'one atop the other', in 'Becoming a Meadow', above – and desire, a perception of the city in its pre-AIDS incarnation as a hedonistic paradise for the gay community, reinforced by the revelation that it is possible to 'flash and hustle all up and down || this avenue'. But death is also imprinted into the words 'body atop body', played out in the living bodies of the mourners and the fallen bodies of the dead, as 'grief's going down all over || these blocks'. Doty envisages the city as 'indifferent and ravenous', indicating the drawing of the dead from many different sections of society, but also the sheer quantity of victims at the height of the AIDS epidemic, corpses piled on top of each other. Furthermore, the sense of worthlessness that is enmeshed in the image of one body 'atop' another has a strong

undercurrent of societal discrimination against sufferers, even after the event of death.

Simon Watney unites concepts of both the living and the dead body when he observes that 'the "homosexual body," which is also that of the "AIDS victim," must be publicly seen to be humiliated, thrown around in zip-up plastic bags, fumigated, denied burial, lest there be any acknowledgment of the slightest sense of loss' (1988: 80). Here, Watney describes a dimension of Doty's 'body atop body' that incorporates an idea of both the private and the public: the humiliation of the AIDS victim must be conducted in a public space, so that the community of non-infected citizens can be satisfied that not only is that person dead, but also that the victim pays a requisite price for their excessive behaviour; in other words, all that flash and hustle must come at a price.

Part of this humiliation also incorporates a dimension of the private, in the sense that the body must be sealed 'in zip-up plastic bags' – an echo of Doty's 'invisible' grief in 'Mercy on Broadway' – positioning Watney's depiction of the disposal of the AIDS dead as an embodiment of overtakelessness, where the corporeal other is literally enclosed and obscured. The city, writes Doty in 'Mercy on Broadway', is 'just as eager || to eat you as to let you go', indicating a ruthless environment that will repudiate the body – living and dead – even as it provides a focus for consumption. With particular relevance for this perception of a delegitimised body – as individual body and the wider body of citizens – during a time of epidemic, Judith Butler explores the notion of a divide between on the one hand 'the domain of intelligible bodies' and on the other 'a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies'. Butler adds that 'the latter is the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside' (1993: xi).

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler claims that the definitions of such domains – that is, the 'regulatory norms' that allow to be ascertained 'what qualifies as a viable body' and therefore by those standards what is, as she describes above, an 'abject' body – are set by the 'workings of heterosexual hegemony' (1993: 16). It is in the establishment and description of these domains that not only is Watney's '"homosexual body"' discarded and 'thrown around' – that is, made abject and unviable – but also that the heterosexual norm is reinforced, so that the viability of the heterosexual body is emphasised; in other words, it is made to *matter*. Gender – or what might be called 'sexed positions' – adds

Butler, is established 'by virtue of its heterosexual positioning, and that is assumed through a move that excludes and abjects gay […] possibilities' (1993: 96).

The process of exclusion is captured in Watney's observation above, that 'the "homosexual body" […] is also that of the "AIDS victim,"' so that, adds Butler, under the terms of 'a normative heterosexuality[,] […] non-heterosexual identifications' are placed firmly 'in the domain of the culturally impossible, […] which is finally rendered illegitimate through the force of the law'. The 'heterosexist economy', Butler writes, 'disempowers contestatory possibilities by rendering them culturally unthinkable and unviable from the start' (1993: 111). Part of the illegitimacy of the homosexual body is enforced by society's conflation of this body with AIDS victim, so that its whole purpose and nature of being is directed towards suffering and death. The disempowerment that Butler discusses takes place at the site of both the living homosexual body and the dead homosexual body; the sexual desire that Doty captures in his phrase 'body atop body' is also intimately bound up with a notion of suffering and death.

Doty's question, 'what can't the city teach you | to want?' above, advances in its most immediate sense the idea that the city presents potentially endless opportunities for exuberant pleasure and achievement. There is nothing in the city that you might want, implies the speaker, and not be able to get. But there is also a more sinister undercurrent to the word 'teach' that implies a more prohibitive city – one where to be on what Butler calls the 'constitutive outside' is to be taught a daily lesson in what you might desire, but can't actually have. Such a lesson is more intimately felt, remarks Butler, when the excluded domain is constitutive of the city – that is, it is situated '*within* the social field […], but "outside" of posited identity' (1993: 194), so that under the terms of the 'existing polity' (1993: 193) it is rendered 'a "constitutive outside" – the unspeakable, the unviable' (1993: 188) and is 'foreclosed from the domain of political signification' (1993: 189).

Butler's notion of the other occupying a domain that is encompassed within the body of the city, but simultaneously excluded from the legitimacy of a fully realised presence, recalls Susan Howe's textual positioning of the elegised other in Chapter 1. Howe's incorporation in her word-collage (Figure 3) of an unassimilable mark that is inside the parameters of the page, but outside what could be construed as the lexical boundaries of

the poem, gives the other a presence that simultaneously foregrounds absence and overtakelessness. However, Doty encounters a social and political reality that appears to put within reach of the homosexual body – that is, the AIDS victim and the wider gay community – what it might want, but deprives this body of the means to get it. Doty's city becomes a space where the living homosexual body must confront not only the effects of the AIDS epidemic on bodily *matter*, but also the *material* effects of the societal response to a disease that excludes the conflated homosexual body/AIDS victim and pushes the other in 'In their Flight', above, to the fringes, 'out toward the edge of the city' to a place 'where they can feast in the fields' (2005: 35).

Doty's observation of the movement of the dead away from the centre of the metropolis carries potent associations with Hart Island in New York City, an area that is located on the outer reaches of the city in the easternmost part of the borough of the Bronx. Hart Island is the city's potter's field, which the OED defines as 'a burial place for paupers, strangers'; in more recent times, it has become a burial site for AIDS victims – Butler's excluded domain made into physical reality – where adults are given mass burials in trenches, each with three sections of forty-eight bodies, resonating with Doty's observation of the city that it's 'body atop body'. In an essay about the site, Melinda Hunt remarks: 'Those who make the trip to Hart Island usually leave feeling unsettled. They have visited a part of America which is more unacknowledged than unknown' (1998: 19).[9] The dead who are enclosed in this frontier territory – that is located both inside and outside the city – are known, but not recognized as fully assimilated citizens.

The dead of Hart Island are unacknowledged as legitimate 'bodies' – removed to the edge of the city, where they are buried in mass, unmarked graves. But they are also not recognised as legitimate subjects of mourning in the sense that, Hunt adds, '[t]he process of burying people removed from public access has denied a complete mourning

[9] From 1991 to 1994, author and artist Melinda Hunt collaborated with photographer Joel Sternfeld in the production of a book of texts, photographs and art works, which in 1998 was published as *Hart Island*. In her essay, 'The Nature of Hart Island', Hunt writes: 'New York is the only major American city to maintain a separate public burial ground for its strangers, for those who die alone and unclaimed or for whom nobody is willing or able to afford a private funeral – a potter's field. The term "potter's field" refers to land purchased for the burial of strangers just outside of town and comes from a passage in the Bible [Matthew 27. 5-7]: "*So Judas flung the money into the temple and left. He went off and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the silver, observing, 'It is not right to deposit this in the temple treasury since it is blood money.' After consultation, they used it to buy the potter's field as a cemetery for foreigners*"' (1998: 19). Hunt's essay also appears on the website of 'The Hart Island Project: New York City Public Burials 1980-2011', <http://hartisland.net/Home/History/tabid/64/Default.aspx> [accessed 22 June 2014].

process to people from all over the country' (1998: 26-27). What are the implications for Doty's dead – and those who mourn them – if, as explored in 'In their Flight', they escape the boundaries of restrictive singularity, and are loosed into a state of desired continuity, only to find themselves subject to fresh exclusions at the edge of the city that limits both their identity and their legitimacy?

In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Gillian Rose turns her attention to the wider social and philosophical implications of Hart Island. In a chapter entitled 'Potter's Field: death worked and unworked', Rose opens with the observation that 'an island called *Potter's Field*' is 'the only *columbarium* for the ashes of the unclaimed, derelict dead of the city – for unidentified murdered bodies, for paupers, and now', she adds, with particular relevance for Doty's work, 'those who die of AIDS in the *triage* wards of the city hospitals' (1996: 102). Striking a more personal note, Rose adds what appears to be a specific recollection:

> New York City, 16 May 1992: the body of my love has been taken to Potter's Field, taken outside the walls of the city; beyond the ramparts, his ungodly ashes will have been scattered upon that collective grave for the unreprieved – without community, without commemoration and hence without end.
>
> (1996: 102)

In Rose's account, what is taking place 'beyond the ramparts', outside the boundaries of the city, to 'the body of my love' has a ghostly parallel in the activities of the wife of Phocion – discussed in Chapter 1 – and Antigone, both 'just outside the boundary' of the city of Athens, engaged in the illegitimate mourning of bodies that have been 'expelled' from the polis (1996: 35).[10] The two mourners are, writes Rose, engaged in 'delegitimate acts of tending the dead', judged by 'the current will of the city', but they are released from such illegitimacy by 'insisting on' the work of mourning in the face of the condemnation of the polis. This is in effect mourning that does not merely resist the law of the city, but supplants it – that is, writes Rose, 'mourning becomes the law' (1996: 35-36).

[10] When Creon, king of Thebes, bans the burial of Antigone's brother Polynices, 'Antigone, believing that it was a sacred duty to bury the dead and especially her close kin, broke Creon's ban and scattered a handful of dust over Polynices' body […]. For this she was condemned to death by Creon and walled up in the tomb of Labdacus' (Grimal 1991: 46).

In this way, it can be argued that the dissolved 'boundaries' that Doty imagines in the above passage from 'In their Flight' are reconfigured to embrace not simply a notion of the released dead, but also the freed body of the mourner, who is loosed from the particularities of the city's disallowance of mourning when he attends to the excluded dead. Rose continues: 'By insisting on the right and rites of mourning, Antigone and the wife of Phocion carry out that intense work of the soul, that gradual rearrangement of its boundaries, which must occur when a loved one is lost' (1996: 35). By observing the movement of the dead towards the fringes of the city in 'In their Flight', Doty's elegy itself insists on an act of acknowledgement that is denied to the excluded domain of bodies by the polis.

By this means, Doty attempts to restore political signification to the excluded, but it is important to note that according to Rose's argument this is not an act of political opposition to the polis as such. The act of refusal of 'the work of mourning', writes Rose, 'tempts us […] to see ourselves as suffering but good, and the city as evil' (1996: 103). However, the 'enormous work' to which Doty refers in 'In their Flight' suggests an acknowledgement that not only must mourning be continued in the face of the city's disapproval – and for Doty, the work that elegy performs to bring to light the plight of the excluded is an integral part of that mourning – but also that the loved one 'belonged body and soul, in his manner of living and in his manner of dying, to the *polis*' (Rose 1996: 102).

In 'Mercy on Broadway', above, Doty's lines, 'what can't the city teach you | to want? It's body atop body here' appear to emphasise that the city offers both desire and demise, encompassing living and dying. These constitute what Rose calls 'the splendour and the misery of that city', to which 'we owed the purity *and* the contamination of our love' (1996: 102) – and if the mourner and the dead are to be truly 'loosed', as Doty puts it, then it is important that both sides of the city are acknowledged. In the following section, I will explore the ways in which Doty goes beyond a simple acknowledgment of what Rose calls 'splendour and […] misery' in his work as he embraces the profound interconnection between eroticism and death. What are the implications for elegy of an encounter that positions incipient death as an event that stimulates intensity and vigour, precisely because of the void that awaits?

Eroticism and the Void

Doty's diction in 'Mercy on Broadway', above, carries a paradoxical freight of freedom and confinement – the phrase 'body atop body' incorporates both a loosening of the ties of inhibition and an observation of a repressive society that might wish to contain what it perceives to be the uncontrollable impulses of homosexuality. A city that is 'just as eager || to eat you as to let you go' describes an urban space that carries the imminent threat of prohibition and punishment even as it appears to facilitate the sexual practices of which it so severely disapproves. Butler remarks on the 'sense of constraint in sexuality in terms of the logic of repudiation by which the normalization of (hetero)sexuality is instituted' (1993: 93). This is a limitation that encompasses not only a preferred conformity to the norm of heterosexuality, but also an implied restriction of what is perceived to be the excessive sexual behaviour of the gay community. How does Doty's work respond to such pressing constraints in the midst of an epidemic that draws the spheres of death and sexuality into a potentially uncomfortable intimacy?

In the opening lines of 'In the Community Garden', Doty's language is freighted with incipient death, even as the sunflowers he scrutinises are in the full bloom of riotous growth:

It's almost over now,
late summer's accomplishment,
and I can stand face to face

with this music,
eye to seed-paved eye
with the sunflowers' architecture:

such muscular leaves,
the thick stems' surge.

(1996: 36)

The sunflowers appear to owe their splendour to 'late summer's accomplishment', a phrase that conveys an idea of the achievement of imminent disintegration – the notion of an artistic project completed – that recalls Doty's observation of his decaying boats' aesthetic of ruin. In 'Two Ruined Boats', Doty draws a parallel between the inanimate objects and the more immediately personal figure of his dying lover as the speaker admits, 'I watch him failing' (1996: 83). The above extract from 'In the Community

Garden' also describes a correspondence between the complex 'architecture' of the sunflowers and the masculine human form, given their 'muscular leaves' and 'thick stems' surge'. But the words 'muscular', 'thick', and 'surge' are inhabited by a distinct physicality, an erotic charge to add to the aesthetic intricacy of the disintegrating boats. Doty's language posits a celebration of eroticism – not only as a mode of thought and behaviour in its own right, but also in recognition of its close relationship with death; the poet highlights a paradoxical association between eroticism as an expression of life operating at full force and a life that is 'almost over'.

What lies at the roots of this link between death and eroticism, and what are the implications for an elegist intent on emphasising the aesthetic and erotic value of a life on the edge of death and overtakelessness? Georges Bataille proposes that 'although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest […] is not alien to death' (1987: 11), which might indicate an initial point of entry to Doty's poem. The 'exuberance of life' is made visible by the sunflowers' display of virility, with which Doty's speaker stands 'eye to seed-paved eye'. But how might it be said that 'the object' of eroticism 'is not alien to death', especially in light of Bataille's argument – carrying echoes of Dean Young's disintegration, discussed in Chapter 4 – that death opens a 'void', which Bataille considers may be understood as 'the corpse into which death infuses absence, the putrefaction associated with this absence' (1987: 59)?

There is in Bataille's link between eroticism and death a personal angle for the poet to explore. In an essay, Doty remarks:

> AIDS makes the experience of the body, a locus of pleasure and satisfaction, almost simultaneously the site of destruction and limit. What if, from here on out, for those burned in that fire, the knowledge of another body is always a way of acknowledging mortal beauty, and any moment of mutual vivacity understood as existing against an absence to come? Presence made more poignant, and more desirable, even sexier by that void, intensified by it.
>
> (2011: 298)

Here, Doty implicitly develops his earlier observation of 'body atop body' from 'Mercy on Broadway' by proposing an idea of different layers of meaning on the site of the body – a consequence of the AIDS epidemic is that the exuberance of 'pleasure and

satisfaction' coexists with the void of 'destruction and limit'. Jeffrey Weeks points out that 'a large part of the male gay revolution of the 1970s lay in the celebration of the body' and adds: 'The cultivation of the body beautiful was a vital part of that. But AIDS is a disease of the body, it wrecks and destroys what was once glorified' (1985: 49-50). Doty's and Weeks's remarks resonate with the wrecking of Dean Young's self, which is subject to its own particular 'fire' before being subject to death and putrefaction. Subsequently, as noted in Chapter 4, there is a notable solitariness in Young's warning to 'the early investigators' that 'you can only get so close to me' (2005: 15).

By contrast, Doty shows that the exuberance of sexual contact with the other – a communal act of 'mutual vivacity' – is not only a defiant act of 'presence' that counters 'absence', but is in fact eroticised by the very fact of an incipient 'void'. There is a sense that just as the muscular leaves and thick stems of the sunflower are magnified and intensified by the irremediable absence into which they are about to disappear, so the experience of sexual attraction is made sharper by the recognition that what is being enjoyed – the body in the time of epidemic – carries no guarantee of presence from one day to the next. This is an eroticism that is shaped by death; its object is not alien to death, as Bataille puts it, in the sense that the eroticised object – the figure that Doty terms 'another body' – is inhabited by a mortality that provides the impetus for, and adds lustre to, the sexual act.

In the above passage from 'In the Community Garden', the speaker reflects that 'I can stand face to face || with this music', indicating a feeling of equanimity with the presence of death that is born of a recognition of the void as instrumental in adding vivacity to life. Bataille admits that '[i]t takes an iron nerve to perceive the connection between the promise of life implicit in eroticism and the sensuous aspect of death', not least because of the aforementioned 'putrefaction associated with this absence', but he adds that 'only death guarantees the fresh upsurging without which life would be blind. […] Life is a swelling tumult continuously on the verge of explosion' (1987: 59). In light of Bataille's remark, Doty's speaker stands 'eye to seed-paved eye | with the sunflowers' architecture', embracing an appreciation of both the sensuous qualities of the object and of the fact that it owes such qualities to the very fact of their imminent 'explosion' and descent into the void. Doty admits in his essay that 'even in the imagined paradise of limitless eros, there must be room for death; otherwise the endlessness of it, the lack of

limit or of boundary, finally drains things of their tension, removes all edges' (2011: 302). The tension and force that is inherent in Doty's 'thick stems' surge' would not be possible without the prospect of the void, to which the 'upsurging' in 'In the Community Garden' takes the sunflowers ever closer:

this one's in a rush
to be nothing but form.
Even at their zenith,

you could see beneath the gold
the end they'd come to.
So what's the use of elegy?

If their work
is this skyrocket passage
through the world,

is it mine to lament them?
Do you think they'd want
to bloom forever?

It's the trajectory they desire –
believe me, they do
desire, you could say they are

one intent, finally,
to be this leaping
green, this bronze haze

bending down.

(1996: 36-37)

Doty integrates the idea of the incipient void with the sensuous exuberance of his sunflowers: a 'rush' towards fully-fledged life – the sunflower hurtling towards its 'zenith' – is also inevitably a rush towards death. In one sense, the sunflower is 'in a rush | to be nothing' – that is, to enter the void that death opens. But from an aesthetic point of view, the 'rush | to be nothing but form' encompasses the idea of the sunflower hurrying to become its fully formed shape, an object of desire – Weeks's glorified 'body beautiful' that knows its zenith, the height of its physical and aesthetic powers, signals imminent wreck and putrefaction because 'you could see beneath the gold | the end they'd come to'. For Doty to see this end is also to recognise the importance of imminent death to the vivacity of the sunflowers' upsurging – without the prospect of incipient demise, there would not be a realistic zenith to aim towards; a sense of

accomplishment would be permanently deferred if the boundary of death were non-existent. 'Do you think they'd want | to bloom forever?', asks Doty, indicating that it is precisely the edges offered by death that give the sunflowers' 'skyrocket passage' its force.

When Doty observes in 'In the Community Garden' that 'it's the trajectory they desire', he appears to confirm the significance of Bataille's upsurging for his sunflowers. But the poet's subsequent declaration, 'believe me, they do | desire', also invests in the word 'desire' its own particular trajectory, given force and movement by its repetition, the alliterative construction 'do | desire', and the line break before the second instance of 'desire' that allows for a pause to add dramatic emphasis. What do Doty's lines illustrate about the trajectory *of* desire, and the trajectory *that is* desired, and how are the two notions interlinked – particularly in terms of their associations with death and the void? Writing on desire and death, Leo Bersani observes:

> Desire […] moves from one representation to another. This movement is destructive in two ways. First of all, images are constantly being abandoned for other images; secondly, the entire movement is generated by the need to get rid of the irritating lack in desire, to replace the emptiness in even the most ecstatic fantasy by the (imaginary) plenitude of satisfaction. But the latter would be the end of movement, of the irritant of desire; it would be immobility, a nondesiring stillness like that of inorganic matter.
>
> (1977: 86)[11]

According to Bersani, the trajectory of desire is inherently unstable because of the fact that the very object it seeks, 'the (imaginary) plenitude of satisfaction', represents the void of 'immobility, a nondesiring stillness'. Under these conditions, it is the very 'lack' at the heart of desire that maintains its potency – or as Doty has it in 'In the Community Garden', the rush of the trajectory is based on a suspension at the threshold between exuberance and the void. In light of this argument, the movement of desire describes and informs the movement of elegy in its encounter with the overtakelessness of the dead – a textual grasping for an imagined and hoped-for plenitude of the elegised other that is never fully realised. If desire is threatened with destruction by the successful completion of its pursuit, does this illustrate that the elegy is dependent for its own trajectory – a repeated movement towards the dead – on its ultimate failure to reach the

[11] Bersani's argument appears in the context of his analysis of the work of Charles Baudelaire and Sigmund Freud in *Baudelaire and Freud*.

elegised other? In effect, the elegy can only encompass the dead by committing itself to its own destruction. Bataille observes the crisis point for desire when it approaches its zenith:

> How sweet it is to remain in the grip of the desire to burst out without going the whole way, without taking the final step! How sweet it is to gaze long upon the object of our desire, to live on in our desire, instead of dying by going the whole way, by yielding to the excessive violence of desire! […] It is one thing or another: either desire will consume us entirely, or its object will cease to fire us with longing.
>
> (1987: 141-42)

Perhaps, therefore, the trajectory that is desired by desire – and by the elegy – is one that is in continual motion, permanently suspended at the boundary of the void, so that an exuberant potency is retained 'without taking the final step' to an imagined plenitude of satisfaction. Bataille adds that 'the terror' of crossing this boundary into death – even given 'the continuity' that death promises – means that '[w]e are incessantly trying to hoodwink ourselves, trying to get at continuity, which implies that the boundaries have been crossed, without actually crossing the boundaries of this discontinuous life' (1987: 140-41); that is, remaining 'in the grip of the desire', of the rush of its trajectory, without succumbing to the void. In other words, writes Bataille of the boundaries, 'we should like to transcend them and maintain them simultaneously', even given the knowledge that the trajectory that is desired gains its strength and drive precisely from the same 'force that demands our disintegration' (1987: 141).

How does Doty suggest the simultaneous transcendence and retention of such boundaries so that the elegy remains in its own grip of desire? In 'In the Community Garden', the poet's homoerotic imagery of 'muscular leaves' and 'thick stems' surge' is reinforced by the sexual implications of 'skyrocket passage', redolent of a phallic thrust before orgasm; further, Doty's observation of the sunflowers that 'they are || one intent, finally, | to be this leaping | green' might describe the trajectory of sperm, the ejaculatory climax of an intense sexual encounter.[12] The trajectory of Doty's passage of writing builds precisely towards such a shattering climax – one that provides the feeling

[12] Cf. Dylan Thomas, 'The Force that Through the Green Fuse': 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower | Drives my green age' (1996: 13). There is an echo of Doty's 'skyrocket passage' in the explosive 'force' of the 'green fuse'; the opening lines of Thomas's poem also resonate with Doty's 'thick stems' surge' when Thomas fuses the idea of the potent forces of nature with the implied human sexual vitality of 'my green age'.

of a 'disintegration', but 'without actually crossing the boundaries of this discontinuous life', as Bataille puts it. Bataille remarks on the subject of 'the sexual urge' that it 'means a barrier destroyed' and adds:

> Demolished barriers are not the same as death but just as the violence of death overturns – irrevocably – the structure of life so temporarily and partially does sexual violence. […] Inevitably linked with the moment of climax there is a minor rupture suggestive of death.
>
> (1987: 106-07)

Bataille proposes that the trajectory of the sexual urge, culminating in 'climax', is a means of experiencing transcendence without suffering actual annihilation; Doty's final 'leaping' negotiates an apparent boundary that is actually only 'suggestive of death', while at the same time executing 'a minor rupture' by means of the line break that separates 'leaping | green'. However, Bataille explains, 'the lure of the void and of ruination does not in any way correspond to a diminished vitality' (1991: II 108); rather, it is precisely the presence of such a void that adds to the exuberance of erotic activity, reflected in the leaping of Doty's sentence from one line to the next, straddling the void of white space at the end of the penultimate line of the stanza.

For Bataille, what constitutes the particular 'void' that provides what he calls 'the feeling of death, in those unbearable instants where we seem to be dying'? It is, he writes, the point at which 'the fullness of horror and joy coincide' (1987: 268). He remarks that the presence of a potential threat intertwined with the sexual act adds to its erotic value, but only if the level of threat is perceived as being sufficiently low so as not to immobilise: 'Danger has a paralysing effect, but if it is a mild danger it can excite desire. We can only reach a state of ecstasy when we are conscious of death or annihilation, even if remotely' (1987: 267).

It is important to note at this point the full implications of Bataille's word 'danger' for an elegist writing during a time of epidemic.[13] To recall Doty's earlier observation that

[13] Prior to the AIDS crisis, bathhouses offered the gay community a private space for free sexual expression that avoided the exposure to danger associated with encounters in public places. In America, Dennis Altman notes changes 'in homosexual behavior in the 1970s', including 'the expansion of homosexual bathhouses and sex clubs, which facilitate numerous sexual contacts in one night (by 1984 one bathhouse chain included baths in forty-two North American cities, including Memphis and London, Ontario)' (1986: 14). However, as the AIDS epidemic began to take hold, the same bathhouses became a

'AIDS makes the experience of the body, a locus of pleasure and satisfaction, almost simultaneously the site of destruction and limit' (2011: 298) serves to foreground the fact that for this particular poet the coincidence of Bataille's 'horror and joy' acquires an actuality – the existence of a real crisis – that further problematises the sexual encounter and its central role in the elegist's own encounter with death and overtakelessness. For the gay community, sexual pleasure became inextricable from the potential for destruction – in the very specific corporeal sense of the immediate and pressing hazard of fatal infection. Doty's poetic response to this danger is illuminated by considering his observation of the sunflowers in 'In the Community Garden' alongside lines from Doty's 'Days of 1981', where the speaker recalls:

> After the subway ride,
>
> he knelt in front of me on the bleachers
> in an empty suburban park, and I reached
> for anything to hold onto, my head thrown back
>
> to blueblack sky rinsed at the rim
> with blazing city lights, then down to him:
> relentless, dazzling, anyone.
>
> (1995: 8)

The 'one intent' of the sunflowers in 'In the Community Garden' incorporates not only a trajectory of desire towards the 'leaping | green' of climax, but also the notion of a determined transgressive purpose: the 'bronze haze || bending down' of the sunflowers crystallises into human form in 'Days of 1981', where the figure who 'knelt in front of me on the bleachers' is hazily anonymous, 'relentless, dazzling, anyone'. Doty brings the delegitimised homoerotic act out of the *private* transgressive space of the homosexual bathhouse and into the still more transgressive *public* arena of a 'suburban park' before being afforded greater visibility by means of the published work. Melissa Zeiger observes that 'AIDS elegies contrarily make pleasure an act of defiance against death' (1997: 133), and this argument appears consistent with the way in which Doty holds up for attention this particular sexual encounter. There is also something of this 'defiance' in

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focal point for animosity at what were perceived to be dangerous levels of promiscuity; as Jonathan Dollimore points out, '[o]rgiastic sexual freedom had become the way of death', and, as a consequence of this perception, 'in the popular imagination', gay bathhouses 'figured as places of contagion and danger' (1998: 294).

Doty's rhetorical question regarding his own work and the sunflowers' celebratory trajectory in 'In the Community Garden':

So what's the use of elegy?

If their work
is this skyrocket passage
through the world,

is it mine to lament them?

(1996: 36-37)

Given the liberating intensity of the sunflowers' 'skyrocket passage' as they approach death and disintegration, what purpose is there in confining this spectacular natural transition to dissolution in a work of artifice? Further, in view of the transgressive satisfaction to be gained by the foregrounding of sexual pleasure in the face of exclusion by what Zeiger describes as a 'demonizing social order' (1997: 133), should 'the use of elegy' be reconfigured to accommodate celebration as well as lamentation? Moreover, asks Doty implicitly, is the death of any individual 'mine' to appropriate for scrutiny in the poem? Given that the elegy is effectively of no practical or spiritual use for the dead – who are, as Doty put it earlier, 'oblivious' in their newly found state of continuity – then the poet appears to confirm the argument that the work of elegy is solely of use to the living. Is it the case that 'lament' is better directed at the plight of the living than of the dead – 'is it *mine* to lament *them*?' (my emphases), asks Doty, implying that a reversal of the question might be more appropriate: that is to say, 'is it for *them* to lament *my life*?' At the beginning of 'In their Flight', Doty asks a question regarding the dead:

Who believes in them?

It doesn't matter much
to the souls, newly set free,
wheeling in the air over the site

of their last engagements.

(2005: 34)

Clearly, the elegist would like to believe in the notion of elegy's usefulness, but, from the perspective of the elegised, 'it doesn't matter much' either way. Once 'the souls' are released from restrictive physical 'matter' and into 'the air' – recalling Emily Dickinson's

poetic vision of transfiguration from 'flesh' to 'fair aerial gait' (1970: 690) – then they are not only 'set free' from earthly concerns, the 'engagements' that are fixed at a particular 'site', but also from the vexed question for the elegist of why the elegy should matter. To be 'wheeling in the air' reveals a carefreeness in death that might question even the raising of Doty's earlier question, 'what's the use of elegy?'. In this context, it appears that Doty's particular strain of transgression is to direct his defiance not so much against death, but rather against the notion that death should even inspire such defiance. His observation of separation – the soul departing from the body, the dead divided from the living – foregrounds a notion of integration, an acknowledgement of death as an inextricable facet of life.

Conclusion

The lexical density of Doty's poetry, rich in elaborate imagery and extended metaphors, suggests a use of elegy for a poet writing during a time of epidemic and societal repudiation – that is, to counter incipient death and corporeal decay by holding up for attention the aesthetic brilliance of the disintegrating body. Doty's encounter with overtakelessness is shaped by a body of writing that implicitly notes the excess that it must leave behind by appearing to relish its own linguistic abundance – the elegy makes its own claim to be an aesthetic object as it approaches the dazzling matter of rust-encrusted boats and upsurging sunflowers. In an interview, Doty declares an affinity with writing that enables 'us to read beneath the often gorgeous elements of surface to the bare, desiring body beneath' (Wunderlich 1998). It is a remark that indicates Doty's own work might reach beyond the purely aesthetic in an effort to see – and allow to be seen – the hidden 'body', a word that carries associations of both a sexual encounter and a poetic meeting with the enigmatic dead. In the following passage from 'Lilacs in NYC', the language is vivid and explicit:

I enter you
[…]
  and violet the crush of shadows
that warm wrist that deep-hollowed

collar socket those salt-lustered
  lilacy shoulderblades,
in all odd shadings of green and dusk . . .

blooming in the field
    of our shatter.

(1998: 91)

Doty describes a mingling of pleasure and pain, exuberance and decay: 'deep-hollowed' indicates at once the pleasures of penetration and the dangers of the abyss; 'lilacy shoulderblades' might be delicate and fragrant, but their proximity to 'crush of shadows', and the harbouring of the word '*blades*' point to the integral violence of eroticism. The adjective 'salt-lustered' recalls Doty's reflection in 'Two Ruined Boats' that 'the world gains lustre as it falls apart' (1996: 82), which in combination with an inference of '*salt-lust*' suggests the closeness of the sexual act to physical and emotional annihilation. Further, the 'odd shadings of green and dusk' metaphorise the human body's closeness to the natural world in a way that recalls the highly eroticised 'muscular leaves' and 'thick stems' surge' of Doty's sunflowers (1996: 36). The above extract is marked by lexical profusion – struggling to bear the cumulative weight of its imagery – accentuated by the scarcity of punctuation so that individual details are liable to congestion.

It is clearly Doty's intention to communicate sensuous pleasure – his passage is characterised by the sort of aestheticised display that the rust of his decaying boats performs with its 'fifty shades of eyeshadow' (1996: 81). But it could also be the poet's design to counter American society's constructed narrative, noted in the Introduction to this chapter, of AIDS as 'the punishment for the forthright expression of certain sexual desires' (Weeks 1985: 50) by refusing to curb his own literary impulse towards excess. That said, Doty's poetic expression, in which he frequently metaphorises death and decay, might not be described as quite as forthright as that of another AIDS elegist Paul Monette, whose 1988 volume *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* is a cycle of poems written in the space of five months after the death of his partner Roger Horwitz. In 'Three Rings', Monette recalls arriving at his dying lover's bedside:

to say *Goodbye I love you* all in my name
all by the howl that knows that after love
is nowhere who the fuck cares if we reassemble
as vermilion birds and fields of violets

(2000: 32)

The lack of punctuation corresponds with the dynamic of Doty's syntax, but for Monette its absence is in the service of an expression of raw anger that is directed not only at the injustice of loss, but also at the kind of metaphor that Doty might produce to engage with a similar loss. Deborah Landau describes Monette's oeuvre as 'enraged, polemical poems' and draws a contrast between the work performed by his elegies and those of Doty: '[L]ike Monette, he [Doty] exposes the homophobic social order that exacerbates the suffering of people with AIDS. But Doty's poems also provide an antidote to an oppressive world by offering readers access to a transformed space beyond brutality' (1996: 194).

Doty and Monette aim to bring to public awareness the fate of those who face the 'brutality' not only of disease, but also that of the wider society of which they are a part – Jeff Nunokawa observes that '[i]f the majority is not inclined to recognize the death of the male homosexual, it is also not inclined to recognize anything else about him' (1991: 9). Picking up on Nunokawa's point, Timothy F. Murphy adds: 'A cultural tradition that defines death as an essential attribute of gay men […] places unique demands on writing about those who have died with AIDS' (1993: 317). Monette responds to this demand with 'fury-infused lines' (Landau 1996: 204), whereas for Doty the demand of elegy might be said to present a particular dilemma: how to acknowledge the realities of his personal crisis and the wider catastrophe for the gay community, while also recognising the requirements of a style of poetry that is given to what he calls 'formal density' (Bolick 1999). In his negotiation with overtakelessness, which for Doty has a personal and a social dimension, how does he execute the delicate negotiation of what could be termed his lyrical and political responsibilities?

In an interview, Doty responds to Katie Bolick's observation that his poems are 'noted for their lyrical language and wealth of detail' by recognising, like Mary Jo Bang in Chapter 2, the integral limitations of language:

> I believe that reality cannot be captured in language, period. It's too complex, too shifty, too difficult to know and to say. I think that reality can be approached, pointed to, suggested, and that the more stylistic means one has at one's disposal the better.
>
> (Bolick 1999)

How does an elegist remain true to the 'stylistic' impulses of his poetry, while also observing the 'reality' of the crisis in which he finds himself? In a review of Doty's poetry, Ruth Padel complains that it displays 'an overabundance of glow' (2002), and Tim Dean notes the critical opprobrium directed at Doty's work 'when he piles adjective upon adjective' (2000). But perhaps a specific purpose of Doty's extravagant language and imagery – his at times overwhelming sensuous detail that creates what Landau terms, above, 'a transformed space' – is to counter what David Kennedy describes as the 'cultural silence that surrounds' victims of disease, and in particular those who have succumbed to AIDS (2007: 74). Kennedy adds: 'Culture and society are always too ready to withdraw words from […] AIDS victims because they are regarded as impure' (2007: 77). Is Doty deliberately restoring words – even to the point of excess – to his allegories of disease and death in order to resist the effects of such a withdrawal?

Doty's extended metaphors play a significant role in the creation of his own aesthetic of ruin; in this respect, there is a clue to Doty's stylistic approach to death in Marita Sturken's observation that photographs of AIDS sufferers 'tended to dehumanize the patient' as they showed the 'disfigured, drained bodies of those in the final stages of the disease' (1997: 152-53). These depictions, which gained strong political currency at the peak of the AIDS epidemic, are in some way countered by Doty's foregrounding of the aesthetic and physical delight that emanates from disintegration – in the above passage from 'Lilacs in NYC', the speaking 'I' and the 'you' he enters are 'blooming in the field | of our shatter'. By means of the vehicle of metaphor, Doty aims to restore humanity rather than diminish it, perhaps as a response to the tendency to 'dehumanize' the AIDS victim. Doty might also be implicitly admitting that what is at the root of his metaphorical portrayals of loss – the deaths of his lover and friends – cannot be explicitly described because of the personal horror that they hold and the extreme physical effects of AIDS. 'Metaphors', adds Sturken, 'are a means of conceiving the inconceivable and unrepresentable' (1997: 222).

In this sense, the metaphorical expression of the lyric poet can afford representation and recognition to a community that is delegitimised by disease and prejudice. Doty also identifies a bridging of the private and the public in '[t]he act of making a poem', a process which, he remarks, 'is a movement from private feeling and perception, the inchoate stuff of experience, into the shared realm of language' (2006). Given this

argument, the use of elegy might be as a potential site for a communal experience, even as it is fulfilling a very intimate pleasure, that of 'giving form' (Doty 2006). In this context, the sunflowers' 'rush | to be nothing but form' (1996: 36) applies also to an elegist who encounters – and attempts to counter – through his work the formlessness of overtakelessness as part of his own inner and outer reality. Ultimately, it is perhaps an uncomfortable truth, as Doty admits, that 'it *is* a pleasure, poetic making, even when what is being shaped is dreadful' (2006).

Conclusion: Working Towards Incompletion

To arrive at the point of a conclusion is ostensibly fitting for a thesis that examines the work of elegy – a literary genre that is brought into being by the event of ending. But the idea of completion, with its freight of psychoanalytic closure and a resolution to poetic mourning, sits uneasily with a study that aims to foreground the distance between a potentially desired presence – the dead captured in their 'essential fullness' (Heidegger 1977: 174) – and the ultimate recognition of an irremediable absence. Overtakelessness, which positions the elegised as unavoidable and yet irretrievable, exerts an irresistible pull on elegy, even as it pulls away the sought object. It is a term that both provides a conceptual framework with which to examine the workings of elegy and establishes itself as a focal point within the poetic work, impelling what Anne Carson observes in Chapter 3 as a desire for *dis*closure – not from her dead brother, but from the condition that now informs his existence. Overtakelessness is, writes Carson in *Nox*, 'that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts', suggesting that the elegy's encounter with the dead might be more accurately described as an engagement with the overtakelessness that encompasses them.

However, this encounter is problematised by the condition's resistance to definition – one might 'collect facts' about overtakelessness but as Carson adds, 'it remains beyond them' as surely as the dead remain 'beyond the hope of touch' (Dickinson 1970: 690). The dynamic of elegy as a repeated movement towards its desired object might be driven as much by a desire to encompass the elegised as it is to comprehend the overtakelessness that renders such work incomplete. In Chapter 1, Susan Howe's presentation of Hannah Edwards's words, 'pursuing shadows and things' (2010: 62), which emerge clearly from compressed, illegible strata of fractured texts, reveals a distinct divide between the idea of a pursuit and its successful completion in practice. Mary Jo Bang's poetic quest, examined in Chapter 2, to 'reach' her son is driven not only by a desire to pull him out of obscurity, but also to try and encompass the amorphous territory that he inhabits – 'where you are' (2007: 24). And in Chapter 4, Dean Young's self-implication in his depiction of 'sad humans' who are 'grasping | at something you can't see' (2005: 54) positions the elusive 'something' – rather than someone – as the object of the elegist's attention.

The repeatedly frustrated pursuit that is enacted on the page implies that 'something' may be achieved by the poem, even if the elegist cannot identify precisely what – or where – that something might be. In an interview, poet W. S. Merwin reflects on poetry of grief:

> The part of you that writes poems hoping that it will make something happen […] is always there. […] When we wrote poems during the Vietnam war we wanted the poems to stop the war. When you write a poem out of grief, what do you want? We still don't know, but we are trying to complete something that we feel is incomplete.
>
> (Elliott and Merwin 1988: 7)

The idea of incompleteness, and incompletion, sits at the heart of the elegist's encounter with overtakelessness. Howe's recovery and subsequent transplantation of textual fragments into her collages indicates an ethical imperative that requires the elegist to foreground precisely the incompleteness that prevents a retrieval of others in their fullness. Howe engages with a trace of the dead, rather than attempting a subjective restoration of a notionally complete other, serving as a reminder of the incompletion that characterises the elegy – that there will always be a surplus of the other that is left behind. In my study of Mark Doty's work in Chapter 5, this excess is brought to light by Gaston Bachelard's notion of an unreachable '*something else*' that evades description (1994: 186). Doty notes the incompleteness and the incompletion of his own poetry in its treatment of disintegrating matter; his words, like those of Bang, cannot achieve their desired exactitude in an encounter with that which cannot be encompassed. But Doty nevertheless shows that the elegy's delight in the aesthetic detail of the examined object, and the pleasure that may be gained by poet and reader alike from the elegy's value as an object in itself, might 'complete something' tangible and enduring.

The conceived presence of the elegised as incomplete fragments – which become the focal point of Carson's *Nox* – serves as a stark reminder of the absence of corporeal matter; for the body of the elegy, incompleteness and incompletion are defined in large part by the lack of a tangible body with which to engage. Merwin notes, above, that there is always a hope that the poem 'will make something happen', and perhaps in the context of poetic grief this hope resides in a question of whether the textual matter of the elegy can be made to *matter*. In the face of what is unfathomable and amorphous, can

the poem establish itself as a meaningful and very present body, even if the constitutive elements of that body speak of permanent absence? Sandra M. Gilbert remarks that there may be 'solace for them [contemporary elegists] as well as their readers in the arduously visionary acts of *making* from which elegies arise' (2007: 437). A crucial part of the work of elegy is, Gilbert implies, the making of a newly conceived body after the *unmaking* of corporeal matter that is accomplished by death.

When Deborah Landau remarks in Chapter 5 that Doty's work offers 'access to a transformed space beyond brutality' (1996: 194), she implicitly notes the beyondness that characterises overtakelessness. If the elegy fails to overcome the integral limitations of language in its efforts to reach beyond its own space of artifice, then perhaps it can position itself beyond the 'brutality' of death and make a virtue of its own aesthetic qualities. This 'transformed space' may protect the poet and the reader, at least temporarily, against the deleterious effects of loss and absence. But does the aestheticising of disintegration contribute to an enhanced appreciation of the brilliance of decay or merely enact a further distancing of the dead from the living? In the context of this question, it is worth recalling Bang's fashioning of an unreal world that appears designed to protect her son, and herself, from the brutal reality of his premature death. But in doing so she risks placing him at an even further remove in a constructed space that appears to reinforce the idea of the poem as a 'turning away' (Blanchot 1982: 171) from the elegised at the very point when it tries to fix the dead in its vision.

Carson, in her dual role as poet and classical translator, goes some way towards embodying the territory of overtakelessness when she visualises the frontier between the elegist and the elegised as 'the space between languages', which is described as 'a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all' (McNeilly 2003: 14). Carson notes both the inevitable incompleteness of translation – the resistance of words to a full assimilation of their nuances and idiosyncrasies – and the shortfall of elegy, which finds itself unable to resist occupying this space, but is potentially rendered mute in the act of doing so. If the space between the elegist and the elegised is envisaged as a divide that might in some way be bridged by the poem, then it is also possible that, in the act of moving into this territory, the elegy becomes an obstructive object in itself – a component of the overtakelessness that it hopes to circumvent. Is the loss of the elegised exacerbated – or even supplanted – by

the loss that is established by the elegy's inability to complete a successful recovery of the dead?

The elegy might present itself as a potential means of restoring a lost connection, but then proceed to draw the elegist into a dialogue with its own shortcomings rather than a fulfilling interaction with the elegised. Bang locates the allure of the elegy in its establishment of 'a space where a conversation continues', which for her means that 'the beloved stays in the world for the duration of the writing' (Kronovet 2008). However, the work of writing the poem, far from providing the solace of creativity noted by Gilbert, above, becomes a source of pain in itself – Bang becomes increasingly aware as she repeatedly re-opens the dialogue with her son that the person for whom she is writing her elegies cannot be located. Furthermore, the elegist develops a heightened awareness of her disintegrating self as she tries to reassemble a fragmented other – Bang remarks of the concentrated period of activity that produced the poems in *Elegy*: 'I could tell that if I didn't make myself stop, I would do it for the rest of my life. I worried that the act of writing was continually refreshing the grief' (Benson 2008). The elegy becomes less a bridge between separate entities and more a barrier to interaction as the elegist becomes preoccupied with self-preservation rather than a restoration of the other.

I have observed throughout this thesis the potentially obstructive presence of the self in an attempted retrieval of the other – not least, in Young's engrossment with an imagined version of the self, incorporating the disintegration of the poet's alter ego. But Bang observes, above, a pressing danger to her own emotional and physical being in a poetic process that is designed at least in part as a regulatory valve for her grief. In an examination of what she calls 'an unsung elegiac tradition of last word poems' (2009: 879), Diana Fuss observes that 'the passion that drives poetry is not the knowledge that the poem will come to an end, but the fear that it may never end', before adding: 'Whereas poetic composition denotes an act of dying, poetic closure represents not death, but the defiance of death – a running for one's life' (2009: 902-03). When applied specifically to the work of elegy – that is, the poetic practice and the nature of the material to which this work gives rise – and bearing in mind Bang's remarks about renewed pain, Fuss's argument indicates that an encounter with overtakelessness can expose the elegist to a fresh tranche of grief generated by the poem. In these circumstances, the act of ending the elegy – albeit with the recognition that any poem is

always incomplete – might represent a more complete 'defiance of death' than the material that constitutes its composition. The 'running for one's life' that Fuss describes – out of and away from the poem – is a counterpoint to the elegy's repeatedly re-enacted running towards the elegised other.

Howe demonstrates that the elegy can harbour the dead when the elegist's body – that is, the body of the individual poem and of the poet's work – becomes a repository for the ashes of the dead, figured by the textual fragments of the other. But if the poet becomes more concerned with saving the self, then how can the elegy work towards protecting the other from the particular facet of overtakelessness that is constituted by temporal distance – with its freight of diminished memory – and subjective misrepresentation? In her autobiographical work *Sources*, Adrienne Rich suggests in a direct address to her dead father that the best means of safeguarding the absent other is perhaps not to write the elegy at all:

> I've had a sense of protecting your existence, not using it merely as a theme for poetry or tragic musings; letting you dwell in the minds of those who have reason to miss you, in your way, or their way, not mine.
>
> (1983: 32)

Rich's notion of a duty of care to her dead father's 'existence' serves as a reminder of the elegist's potential obligation to present not only an idea of who the elegised was, a corporeal living presence, but also who, or perhaps *what*, he is now – a strangely present absence. Rich also implicitly notes the significant distance between what constitutes a particular existence as it might be harboured in the mind and the subsequent working out of that material onto the page. Moreover, Rich's proposed ethical protection of her father incorporates an understanding that memories of him as an individual – and perceptions of what might constitute his existence now that he is dead – do not solely reside in a single subjective written account. The temptation, particularly with regard to those poets who have suffered personal loss, to present for consumption in a public arena what might come to be viewed as definitive representations of the dead, must be set against the needs of a wider community of mourners. In effect, Rich proposes a relinquishment of the individual to the communal in order to try and ensure that the safeguarding of the absent other is not compromised by a subjective idea of how that protection might best be served.

The thought of such a relinquishment is difficult to accommodate, not least for an elegist such as Doty, whose poems emerge from a personal crisis that is a microcosm of a wider catastrophe. The condition of overtakelessness throws into sharp relief the tension in elegy between the claims of the individual and the demands of a community for signification and recognition. The singular other, already lost from the world of the living, appears to be consigned to an even more impenetrable territory by the absorption of the individual into a generalised experience of communal and catastrophic loss. This is a concern with particular relevance to elegists in America where the significance of the individual has been inexorably erased by saturated media coverage of international disasters and the domestic reality of death on a huge scale following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the AIDS epidemic. David Kennedy observes that 'the […] elegist has felt obliged to justify writing of a single death in the age of mass deaths. At the same time, this consciousness of other deaths has revealed that the uniqueness of a single death is delusional' (2007: 58).

In the first chapter of this thesis, Howe holds up for attention the ethical importance of a preservation of uniqueness in her retrieval and recovery of textual fragments from the archive. In my final chapter, Doty arrives at an acceptance of the value of the whole over the individual part from an aesthetic perspective – the communal brilliance of his dead mackerel in their 'universe | of shimmer' (1996: 13). But he also appreciates from an ethical perspective that in the midst of an actual catastrophe the potentially painful removal of individual loss as the elegist's primary focus should be offset by the recognition that each individual is a participant in a larger machinery of experience, and that the restorative power of communality can be a balm for personal loss.

Kennedy asserts that 'it is simply not possible to give up one's dead. Time may reduce the pain of their loss but our dead remain a part of us' (2007: 57). Doty's work suggests that the elegy can observe the truth of this statement, while also accommodating the notion that the movement of the individual from life into death is for the dead at least a liberating process of being 'loosed from particularity' into a territory where 'the flock can unknot itself | freely' (2005: 35). Doty's vision of the dead as 'newly set free' (2005: 34) into an existence of desired 'continuity' (Bataille 1987: 15) represents a surprising negotiation with overtakelessness in the sense that Doty appears to note not only the

value of communality over individuality, but also the worth of the amorphous territory that claims the dead. Crucially, this appreciation of overtakelessness – which envisages lost others as blissfully oblivious to the work of elegists to protect the dead in the space of the poem – comes from the imagined perspective of the absent other rather than the living mourner.

In an essay, Lynne Tillman considers the significance of the distance between the mourner and the mourned: 'Of death, mortals are absolutely ignorant. The dead, fortunately, are beyond caring' (2011: 280). From her description of the dead as 'beyond caring', it is possible to infer not only that the elegised has a serene disregard for the ministrations of the elegist, but also that the dead recognise the value of their own overtakelessness because it puts them beyond reach of the protective grasp of the poetic mourner. Nevertheless, even with the knowledge that the dead are oblivious to what appears on the page, and taking into account the position of absolute ignorance from which the elegist begins, individual elegies continue to work towards their own (in)completion. Kennedy observes 'the elegist's perpetual falling short of the fact of death' (2007: 81), which, while indicating the divide in elegy between desire and fulfilment, also suggests the survival of the genre despite, or perhaps more pertinently *because of* its own repeated failure to complete a movement towards – and beyond – that which is unavoidable, but cannot be encompassed.

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